Fertile Soil in the Lungs of the Earth

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/40394742.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Rape/Non-Con
Categories:	M/M, Other
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Charlie Countryman (2013)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Other(s), Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter/Nigel (Charlie Countryman)
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Nigel (Charlie Countryman), Alana Bloom, Franklyn Froideveaux
Additional Tags:	this is really weird guys, Ominous Witch Doctor Warnings, Tentacles, non-consentacles, Sex Honey?, Anal Sex, Homosexuality, Drugging I guess, mentions of death/injury, Will Chooses Dick Over Air, Exhibitionism, Weird Shit is Happening in the Amazon, The Plants are Horny, Hannibal AU, Mentions of dead animals, so many plants, Contact Dermal Hypersensitivity AKA touch-it-and-you-horny, Come-eating Tree, cant believe thats a tag, Human/Plant Sex, FaceFucking, Accidental Voyeurism, Accidental Exhibitionism, Come Swallowing, Somnophilia, Ruined Orgasm maybe, Top Will Graham, Bottom Hannibal Lecter, Deepthroating, Pity Sex, Nigel is an Ass, Gratuitous Smut, as usual, this is my comfort fic, Sex Pollen
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-07-18 Completed: 2022-08-03 Words: 38,201 Chapters: 10/10

Fertile Soil in the Lungs of the Earth

by MagnifyingGlass

Summary

Hannibal AU! Will Graham is a grad student researching invasive plant species in the Amazon under the guidance of Professor Hannibal Lecter, botanist. They head to South America to study some odd blood samples sent by Hannibal's brother Nigel, who is tucked into a dense river basin supposedly studying carnivorous plants. Strange things are happening in the jungle; Will and Hannibal must navigate the surprising adaptations of Bolivian plant life.

Notes

This little story came to life after I stumbled upon a really neat cryptobotany page online. It's mostly an excuse to nerd out over weird plants, so sorry if things get a little too technical. Some of this research made me laugh out loud, to be honest. A lot of the plants in this story are based off of plants that actually exist and as soon as I figure out how to add pictures here, you'll have some entertaining images to use as reference for the weird shit that happens.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Hanni & Will are heading south, discussing their expedition into the Amazon forest and ignoring the attraction they have to one another.

Chapter Notes

Attached is an image of the carnivorous pitcher plant. The story that Hannibal mentions about a little girl drowning in one is a true story, unfortunately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you have sensitivities to khaki?”

Will looked down at his clammy fingers tugging at the hem of his cargo shorts. “No - sorry, I think I’m just a bit nervous about the trip. Good nervous, I mean. Excited maybe?”

His voice was barely heard over the hum of heavy, turbine engines jetting them through the skies. Hannibal had to tilt his head toward Will to hear him clearly.

“Careful planning helps me with travel jitters. Did you follow the supply checklist?”

With an over-eager mania, Will had studied Hannibal’s supply list three times over while packing, positively ensuring he’d brought everything he might need for a trip into the Amazonian jungle. He couldn’t look a fool, not in front of the teacher he had so desperately admired for years. He took a steadying breath and recounted Hannibal’s slanted scrawl with precision. “Lightweight clothing for the heat, waterproof clothing for wet days, animal repellant, two pairs of boots, emergency torch in case yours goes out, southern Bolivian map, flask, water purifying tablets, high factor sunscreen, first aid…”

Will trailed on until Hannibal held up a hand with a smile. “It sounds like you’ve got everything. Does it help to hear it out loud?”

Sinking back into the smooth leather of his seat, Will nodded, sheepish. “I even started a heavier workout regimen. I figured the jungle would be a bit more difficult to navigate than the campus track lanes.”

“That it is.”

“How many times have you been down there?”

“To South America, only once before. But I’ve never been to Nigel’s field station. This will be a first for me.”

“What’s South America like?”

“It has rich, widely varied cultures. They have a very long history of creative agricultural practices, internal conflicts and strong religious beliefs. A lot for someone to study as a whole.”

“Well thank you for letting me tag along. I’ve probably put off a research expedition longer than I should have,” Will noted. “But this is the first year in my program that I’ve been able to afford study without having to teach undergrads. Funds would have been real tight if you hadn’t helped me with that NSF grant.”

“I’m your advisor Will, that’s what I’m supposed to do. I’m glad you can join me. We’ll still need to purchase more supplies once we land in Tarija,” Hannibal saw the quick flash of concern on Will’s face. “The department will cover that, and more if needed. Don’t worry.”

It took a lot of willpower to keep Will from flushing in embarrassment. He was paying his own way through his graduate program. His scholarships had long dried after his third year of research and the stress-induced nightmares of having to abandon his studies kept him up at night.

“You’ve been very helpful with everything, thank you again. It still feels like I know nothing about navigating higher academics.”

For three years, Hannibal had been a confidante, a foundation, a relief through Will’s early twenties as he scrambled to keep up with his well-funded peers in school. He was now scrutinizing Will with a look that Will didn’t want to parse through.

“Navigating around academics can only get you so far when you’re studying invasive tropical species. Eventually you’ll have to navigate the actual tropics.”

Will nodded. A playful smirk lifted the corner of his mouth, and a question he’d been burning to ask can’t be contained anymore. “Did you see any of the ayahuasca I’ve heard about, when you were down here last time?”

A low, raspy laugh pleased his ear. Hannibal’s grin wrinkled the corners of his eyes. “No. Is that something you were looking to explore?”

Shrugging, Will chuckled. “I’m curious, I’ll admit. Don’t know if I could actually go through with it.”

“I’m sure Nigel could wrangle some if you ever get serious. He sent over a very detailed journal of his experience with ayahuasca some years ago. Apparently is a must-do if you spend any time in the Amazon.”

“Heh – important for the discerning conservationist’s resumé.”

“You become one with nature, why not? He also gave very specific instructions on how to prepare yourself for the experience. For two weeks before, one must avoid pork, excess salt, fermented foods, heavy spice, and some other things I can’t recall.” Hannibal quirked a thin brow and winked. “One must also avoid sexual pursuits as well.”

With a snort, Will shook his head. “I don’t have to worry about that.”

He couldn’t figure out what Hannibal’s knowing nod meant. “What?”

“You’re handsome. Why wouldn’t you have your pick of the crowds at Georgetown?”

Attempting to wipe a blush from his cheek, Will ducked his head. “I’ve decided to steer clear of the men on campus.”

A glance aside showed that Hannibal was considerately attempting to hold back his smile. Will paused, realizing what he had admitted and the blush he has been holding at bay was inevitable.

“Eh – I mean –” Will’s nose scrunched as he turned his face away. “I don’t have much time for –”

“Don’t have much time for breaking hearts, I hear you.”

“Those vaccines we got in preparation were really something, huh?” A near shout that disturbed the passengers nearby as Will scrambled to divert conversation.

Hannibal let him off with a soft laugh. “The malaria tablets were the hardest on me, I think. They don’t agree with my stomach. Did you get enough for eight weeks?”

Grateful and nodding, Will loosed a sigh of relief. “I started the first rounds two weeks ago, I have two weeks’ worth with me now and I have a script at home for another four after we get back. I’ve also been taking antihistamines and got a couple of EpiPens just in case.”

“That’s smart,” Hannibal noted with a pleased smile. “I didn’t even put those on your supply list.”

-

Aeropuerto Internacional Oriel Lea Plaza was balmy, reminding Will of his dirt-clad childhood in the swamps of the deep south. He stepped onto the black tarmac of the airport runway to a familiar, nostalgic heat. It was surrounded by wide, squat palm trees overflowing with massive fronds that nearly touched the earth and sheltered an oddly out-of-place statue of a pale man in robe, waving at the new arrivals.

“Pope Jean Paul III.” Hannibal leaned toward Will when he noticed the quizzical look on his face. “Catholicism was established in eastern South America in the sixteen-hundreds, I believe.”

“The long arm of Christianity.”

“It couldn’t beat out local paganism though, no matter how they tried.”

Will cocked an eyebrow. “That’s impressive.”

“Do you want to explore Tarija before we catch the bus south? It doesn’t leave ‘til –” Hannibal checked his watch. “Oh, I forgot about the time difference. It leaves now, I think. This way.”

A while later, Will and Hannibal were cramped together on a cracked vinyl bench in a trundling, crowded bus with their travel packs between their feet. Hannibal said it would be a two-hour ride to Rio Negro and they would likely be the entertainment for the locals traveling with them. Groups of short, deeply tanned families in brightly colored clothing kept glancing at them in curiosity; the only tall, pale foreigners sweating heavily in the back of the bus amongst cages of chickens and a goat dropping brown pellets that rolled toward Will’s shoes. Their driver smoked a fat, stubby cigar that perfumed the entire bus and made his passengers drowsy and dulled.

“Did you get a chance to document any Ficus members when you were here before?” Will looked up from his wrinkled observation journal.

Nodding, Hannibal stretched to lay his arm along the seat behind Will’s shoulders. Will felt momentarily guilty; Hannibal’s long frame was not suited for cramped, converted school buses. He should have insisted Hannibal take the aisle seat. “There are many Ficus varieties here. It’s astounding how they proliferate so well when there’s such fierce competition for sunlight in the denser parts of the forest. You’ll have lots to study.”

“We’re usually pretty good at controlling strangling species back home, it’ll be interesting to see how they spread when they’re unchecked in the wild.” Will was thoughtful as he looked out the windows. “This is a great opportunity, Hannibal. Thank you again.”

“You don’t need to thank me again.” Hannibal patted Will on the shoulder with the arm around his back. “I’m just glad you could come.”

-

The small village of Rio Negro was more touristy than Will had expected. They stepped off the cramped *aerobus*, shouldering their packs and waving to their swarthy driver in thanks. The town was small, but apparently accustomed to *turistas* stopping by on their way toward the more popular trails in Argentina. Though few, the stucco remnants of ancient colonialization still stood, dotting the town in brilliant white between open air shacks of feeble wood that lined dusty streets. Will and Hannibal wandered through town in search of last-minute supplies and later, they would start east into the lowlands of the jungle. Hopefully with the help of an opportunistic local they could hire for a ride toward their destination before the roads gave way to dense vegetation.

Hannibal, with a very loose grip on the local *Aymara* language, was successful in haggling the last of their supplies and they decided to find a meal before turning toward the forest. Neatly maintained, busy streets led them to close-quartered, quiet alleys lined with eclectic shops offering multitudes of wares. Will couldn’t absorb everything fast enough; his head on a quick swivel as they passed stall after stall lined with bins of unknown grains, roots, home remedies, brightly colored clothing and innumerable curiosities. Unidentifiable meats were strung from colored umbrellas as their purveyors beckoned them closer. Wide-brim straw hats and heavily woven fabrics hung from what seemed like every available space. Will recognized dead frogs, dried snakes, and a few bundled herbs but the soapstone figurines and murky bottles of innocuous potions were a mystery. The smile spreading Hannibal’s lips was fond as he watched Will’s enthusiasm.

“You’d look great in one of those hats.” Will winked. “What is all of this?”

“One of the infamous Bolivian witch markets,” toned Hannibal. Will’s shaggy curls swung to and fro, catching the sun to shine coppery-gold.

Will turned to him, eyes bright. “More of the local paganism?”

“The people in the *Aymara* world believe that gods and spirits exist in the mountains, the skies and in natural forces like lightning or rain. Pachamama is the earth goddess responsible for fertility, healthy soil and good crops. They make offerings regularly.”

Will stopped short and Hannibal nearly collided with him. “Is that –”

Dehydrated, gangly and hanging from their necks under the overhanging of a crowded stall, Will gestured toward surprisingly large and unbearably cute animals.

“Yes,” said Hannibal. “Dried llama fetuses are used to garner favor from the spirits.”

Biting his lip, Will looked over his shoulder at Hannibal with eyebrows gathered.

“They’re buried in new building foundations as offerings to Pachamama. They keep the poorer construction workers safe during their projects,” Hannibal murmured, tilting his head with an air of mystery to his tone. “The well-off builders sacrifice live llamas. Wait until you see the wandering witch doctors. They roam the streets in dark dress, offering fortune telling services to the most curious of passersby.”

Snorting, Will’s mood lifted as they left the stalls behind.

-

“Yeah, I couldn’t guess how to pronounce it over your email,” Will shouted as they bounced and swayed in the open bed of a rickety pickup truck. Their driver, a stocky man of indeterminate age, bared a wide, gap-filled smile when Hannibal presented him a small fold of *boliviano* bills and gestured toward the basin of Rio Negro valley. Will had to clutch his pack tightly to him lest it bounce out of the vehicle as they navigated dusty, pothole-ridden roads.

“Like the word *chewy*. Juy-Juy.” Hannibal had to raise his voice over the intermittent creaking from the old truck’s frame. “Once we make it to Talaba, Nigel can explain it better. I couldn’t get much information about it because he was more interested in describing the animals.”

“When did he send you the blood samples?”

“About a year ago.” A particularly rough jump of the truck bed had Hannibal gripping the housing of a boxy camera around his neck protectively. “All six samples contained a microbe he couldn’t place. It looked familiar to me, but I couldn’t be sure. Like a fern spore. I told him I would get a better idea of what exactly it was if I could get a look at freshly drawn blood, not something that had spent a month in a test tube that passed from hiker, to bus, to boat, to airport and so on. There was too much cell deterioration for me to be confidant in any results.”

Will nodded a little more enthusiastically than intended as the truck dipped through another series of potholes. “That’s what you’re going to be studying while I’m looking for the strangling fig?”

“Yes. You won’t have to look far if I remember correctly.”

“I guessed so as well. I found a lot of journals detailing the proliferation of strangling vines all across the Amazon. Hopefully I can get some concrete evidence on why.”

The strain it took for Hannibal to maintain the volume of his voice was obvious; he was a man unaccustomed to raising his voice. “Nigel said he’s seen lots near his camp. I'm sure he can help you find all sorts of strangling vines, but I think he’s been frustrated that he can’t find any Juy-Juy.”

“What does it look like?”

“Its beautiful, apparently. I couldn’t find any examples.” Hannibal paused, eyes darting to the side before looking at Will again with a sheepish smile. “I didn’t mention but, supposedly it sprays a soporific pollen that incapacitates large animals. Once they’re asleep, it sends down blossoms with powerful suckers or *tentacles* to gather the animals for consumption.”

“Tentacles,” Will said with a flat look of incredulity.

Hannibal laughed as a gust of wind blew tawny hair back from his face. “He might have hit the ayahuasca too hard but yes, his email specifically said tentacles.”

“He means pistils?”

“Apparently they’re tentacles.”

Rolling his eyes, Will snorted. “And these *tentacles* gather up unconscious animals that Nigel has found passed out in the forest? To eat them? What’s his evidence if he hasn’t actually seen a Juy-Juy?”

“All he’s gathered so far is blood samples and legends from the locals.”

“It sounds like a myth.”

Hannibal nodded in agreement. “That’s why I hadn’t mentioned it.”

“Is he alone when he gathers these samples? Has anyone else actually seen the animals?”

“He has a study group that comes out a few times a year to collect his data and deliver samples to the states. They might have seen something. You can ask him when we see him, I don’t know much more. My job here is to examine newly collected blood samples and report upon them to

the university's journal of botanical survey." He looked toward the front of the truck, squinting as wind blew headlong into his eyes. He pulled a folded paper from his pockets and squinted at his own scrawl. "Once our helpful friend drops us off, it's two days to Talaba and then he'll met us there."

Their driver took his time coasting through two hours of blind curves and bumpy roads before stopping at a shadowy turnout with billowing clouds of dust overcoming them from behind. Will was grateful for a break from the sun and grateful for a chance to relax from his stiff grip on the truck's frame. They unfolded from their positions with similar groans of relief and they waved off their driver. His wide smile was knowing; and somehow sarcastic. He shouted what Will assumed was a pardoning of luck before he backed the truck out of the turnout and disappeared around a bend.

They were left alone, standing side by side next to a wooden pole listing the lengths of hike to distant villages in the forest. The nearest was seventeen kilometers away. Talaba was thirty-eight kilometers away.

Will and Hannibal have two days of trekking along a well-worn path of sunlight-dappled terrain. They would be alone, save for the animals watching them from behind dense vegetation and in lofty trees. Will was thrilled. He turned to Hannibal with a gleeful smile baring flat, shiny teeth.

Hannibal's smile matched his own.

"Are you ready?"

-

Verdant, breathtaking wildlife stretched as far as the eye could see when Will and Hannibal crested the top of a peak in the valley some hours later. Will wondered if it's the last untamed frontier on earth. Wild. Some people don't like the wild. They don't like untamed things; they're obsessed with control. They take pleasure in overcoming it, taming it. So they destroy the planet, but then pride themselves in preserving miniscule portions of nature that they still control tightly with insipid park rangers in insipid canvas hats. Trying to protect something that's already gone.

The jungle was loud with preening from various animals calling for mates, alight with the buzzing of frantic pollinators and stinging insects. It was muggy as the air, the very atmosphere they breathed, was churned through the deep inhalations and clarifying exhalations of the trees around them. They were sweating, living, moving through the oldest and most preeminent of the planet's cycles. Will was simply astounded over the difference in seasons between the northern and southern hemispheres.

"It's forty degrees back in Virginia," he called behind to Hannibal, after a long stretch of silence. "All the leaves have fallen off the trees outside of my apartment."

"And here, the last of the spring lambs have started running," said Hannibal, panting as he caught up. "October, and autumn itself, holds a vastly different significance in the southern hemisphere."

"I surprised they still call it autumn, to be honest." Will laid his pack on the ground to find his flask of water. "It feels wrong to associate it with heat like this."

"Some other countries don't even track seasons like we do. In southeast Asia, they only have two. The wet season and the dry season."

"What were you studying in southeast Asia?" Will wiped his mouth and nodded toward the winding dirt path, allowing Hannibal to lead on as he repacked his flask.

"We tracked the spread of the giant pitcher plant. Have you ever seen one?" Hannibal brushed aside an overhanging vine.

"Not in person, not a giant one."

"They can get up to four feet tall," Hannibal smiled at Will's impressed whistle. "The nectar it secretes inside of the bowl lures thirsty animals and insects, like the standard pitcher plant, but its sheer size allows it to catch much bigger prey. There was a small town, a village, really, in the Lojing Highlands that lost one of their little girls when her brother wasn't watching her carefully enough. They didn't find her in time."

Will winced, air hissing between his teeth. "The nectar is the same, in the giant ones?"

Regretfully, Hannibal nodded. The pitcher plant's sweet nectar carried enzymes and acids that would eventually break down the carcass of any prey it lured; unable to scale the slimy walls of the pitcher's deep bowl. "Nigel said he once found one as big as himself in Hăinán. He was obsessed with them for months, I couldn't figure out why."

They stopped after hiking for some hours, Hannibal's thin shirt was plastered to his chest with plentiful sweat and Will had to distract himself. He knew the lowest parts of the jungle darkened early, and they'd need to set up camp for the evening. The clearing they settled in was thankfully devoid of the worst of vegetation they'd passed, but heavily shadowed under thick-armed Soto trees.

Setting up tents overflowing with gauzy mosquito nets took little time with the pair working together. They stretched out to digest a hearty meal with a dancing fire between them as the last tendrils of evening light fade into the gloom of night. Hannibal was edged in darkness, illuminated by a flickering glow and Will couldn't decide if he was more beautiful in brilliant sunshine or in alluring shadow.

"Is there something on my face?"

Caught, Will looked away quickly. "Uh – no, you, um –"

When he looked up again, Hannibal's knowing smile made things all the worse.

“It’s dark, there’s not much else to look at is there?”

A heavy puff of air lifts Will’s curls from his eyes. He really needed to get a hold of himself. Hannibal would only excuse his staring so many times.

“Sure, yeah. Sorry.” Will leaned against his pack, tilting his face up toward the canopy of trees above. The barest glimpses of twinkling stars peek between the broad, flat leaves of their shelter. “Can you tell me about other plants you’ve studied?”

“Have you heard tales of the south pacific death flower?”

“You mean the corpse flower?”

“The death flower of Ell-Banoor.” Hannibal replied, shaking his head. He stretched long legs to warm near crumbling logs and reclined on an elbow. “Not something I’m even sure is real. But I’ve heard stories from Nigel.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s tall, like the corpse flower but with massive calyx that droop to the forest floor, making a beautiful, perfumed cavern that a man can walk into. But the calyx supposedly curl around you, dose you with sedative spores and you’ll sleep forevermore. And eventually die dreaming,” Hannibal trailed, ponderous at the jumping, bright flames ahead. “The flower will absorb the rotting corpse, bones and all, over a long period of time. I guess it doesn’t need to eat often.”

Chuckling, Will tilted to look forward again. “Spores don’t break down bodies. What causes the rot?”

“I have no idea,” Hannibal laughed. “Its only a myth, as far as I know.”

“If we find one, I’ll be sure to credit you in my reports.”

“If we’re alive to report it. Let me know if you smell anything particularly attractive in the trees.”

“Oh,” Will sighed, “I’m sure I could find something attractive nearby.”

He tipped his head back again, refusing to look to see if the suggestion in his words landed. Hannibal’s silence was all the affirmation he needed. He hoped his smile was hidden in the shadows.

Will was shaken awake an unknowable amount of time later by a gentle hand on his shoulder. The fire was burning low and Hannibal’s shoes were illuminated by a slim flashlight between them.

“Bedtime, I think,” Hannibal rumbled.

Humming in agreement, Will was surprised he had fallen asleep while so uncomfortably angled over his pack. He gathered himself to stand, stretching long, and bid goodnight.

The mosquito nets under his tent were an ordeal to wrangle as he climbed inside and flopped onto his bedroll. At night, the jungle’s humidity caught a surprising chill and he needed a heavier cover than he expected. Will was snug, warming quickly and teetering over the edge of boundless dreams when the faintest beat of frail wings coasted over his face. Something delicate landed on his cheek.

“What?!” With a horrified yell, Will jumped from his blankets, fought to untangle from the mosquito nets and twisted from his tent, beating at his face and hair.

“Will! What's wrong?" Hannibal’s tent illuminated as he found his light and he scrambled from his own tangle of nets. Hannibal’s light swung over Will’s body, looking for anything as he spun in place frantically.

“There’s – something went for my face!" Will yelped. “It was attacking me – like a bat or something!"

With a wild swipe of his arm, Will’s palm connected with something soft and lightweight that fell to the dirt. “There!”

The beam of Hannibal’s light fell to the ground and landed on a large, feeble-looking moth floundering in the dirt, stunned by Will’s blow. As they looked on, the moth righted itself, flapped its wings as if indignant, then took off into the night.

Will and Hannibal were both silent as they looked at each other.

“It…it was going to bite me.”

Hannibal checked his smile but the mirth in his eyes was apparent. “A killer moth, yes.”

Will absolutely refused to laugh.

“Are you alright?”

“Yep.”

“Are we going back to bed?”

“Yep.”

“Then I bid you good night.”

Will trudged back to his tent, thankful for the darkness covering his shame. He settled into the blankets once more, after ensuring his nets were closed and listened as Hannibal did the same. They were silent for a long moment as Will willed his embarrassment to go away.

“Things are getting pretty dangerous, huh? Maybe we should think about going back home.”

Hannibal’s answering, raspy laugh was now becoming endearingly familiar.

-

Talaba turned out to be a small fishing village nestled at the edge of Rio Negro, sparsely populated with smiling locals familiar with the comings and goings of Nigel’s visitors. As Will and Hannibal neared the edge of town, they were guided past carefully tended patches of wild gardens, through short roads lined with homey-looking wooden shacks and on towards a quiet town center by the susurrus of a calm, wide river. They were greeted by friendly villagers dressed in brightly lined clothing and scores of curious children peeked from behind their mothers’ skirts. When they laid their packs down in what must have been the town’s square, Will was delighted.

“I can’t imagine how they get along here,” he breathed. “This is so isolated, they can’t have changed their way of life very much, for generations. I wish I could speak the language.”

“I can teach you the basics,” Hannibal said, kneeling to rummage through his pack on the ground. “Although I only know enough to ask for a restroom and where to sleep at night. I can also count to fourteen very well.”

He stood, having fished a pouch of money from his pack. “Nigel should be here by nightfall but its barely two, so let’s see what we can scrounge for a meal in the meantime.”

As far as they knew, Talaba had no markets for supplies or food; the locals must hunt, fish or travel for their necessities. Hannibal was able to pay an older gentlemen to butcher and fry one of his wife’s scraggly chickens for them to share as they sat on a roughly hewn dock, awaiting Nigel and drinking bottles of warm, pale beer while the sun lowered to the trees on the horizon. An aging, algae-lined houseboat was tied at the end of the dock, knocking against the wood occasionally as the river’s flow caught its hull. Its incongruity with the surroundings made Will wipe grease from his mouth and point.

“Do you think ex-pats make it out this far?”

Hannibal shrugged and leaned back on an arm, satisfied with their meal. “Do you want to find out?”

Without waiting for a reply, he downed his beer and lifted his toes from the dark waters, padding toward the boat’s rusted framework, leaving Will and their packs behind.

“Wait Hannibal, we can’t just –”

“*Laphi!”* Hannibal cupped his hands around his mouth and shouting in greeting, leaning over the rail and peering into the boat’s interior.

“Eh,” came a bleary shout, “what?”

Hannibal stepped back from the boat, hands politely tucked behind his back as a portly man knocked open the boat’s screen door and staggered out onto the deck. He was haphazardly dressed in wrinkled linen and his dark, shaggy beard and waved hair obscured a lined, sun-aged face. He blinked heavily, clearing his vision before spotting Will and Hannibal standing at the edge of the dock.

“Hello,” greeted Hannibal primly.

“Oh-ho!” The man stood taller, not by much, and cleared his throat as a wide smile plumped his cheeks. “American?”

Nodding quickly, Will stood and stepped close to Hannibal, unwittingly shielding himself with his frame.

“Indeed,” Hannibal held out his hand which the man shook with enthusiasm. “I’m Hannibal and this is Will. We’re here to visit my brother’s field station to the east.”

The man looked up, squinting at Hannibal’s face before recognition sharpened his eyes. “You’re Nigel’s brother! I should have known! You look just like him. My name’s Franklyn, pleased to meet you. And welcome to Talaba!”

Franklyn held out a hand toward Will.

“Are you American?” Will asked.

“Not only American.” Franklyn beamed, “I’m a proud Empire Stater! Would you like to come aboard? You guys have come a long way.”

Nodding in thanks, Will and Hannibal were ushered into the long cabin of the houseboat, eclectically furnished with obvious relics of Franklyn’s travels and smelling like oddly sweet alcohol.

“I guess I shouldn’t call myself a New Yorker anymore though,” Franklin explained as he seated them at a rickety dining table and opened three fresh bottles of beer. “I’ve been here too long. I’m pretty sure the states wouldn’t dare let me in again.”

He sat next to Will and leaned forward with his elbows on the table, eager for conversation. “What brings you two out here? You’re not part of the usual crowd that comes by, are you?”

Looking toward Hannibal, Will answered after receiving a nod. “We’re studying whatever Nigel has for us at his camp. Coming from Georgetown University.”

Franklyn bobbed his head, swigging his beer quickly and knocking the bottle against the edge of the table before managing a precarious landing. “I wish I could remember where the other group came from, you guys could probably compare notes. They come by often enough.”

“How long have you been in Talaba?” Hannibal asked.

“Oh gee, let me think.” Franklyn leaned back in his creaking chair. “It’s gotta be at least four years by now. My wife and I spent some time in Chile before wandering up the Rio Negro, stopping here and there before docking for what was supposed to be short visit.” He licked over his teeth as if recalling a sour memory. “Talaba didn’t suit Liv.”

Blinking quickly, Will pulled from his beer, looking around as Hannibal smiled in commiseration. “I can’t imagine life in the jungle is for everyone.”

Shaking his choppy hair, Franklyn agreed. He studied the murky waters outside for a moment, lost in thought as the three men lapsed into silence.

“Your brother seems to be doing great though, I met him when he first arrived. Said he and his coworker we’re going to conquer the Amazon.” Franklyn’s cheer returned with a deep chuckle. “Seems like it’s working, those two are busy.”

“Coworker?” Hannibal’s brow wrinkled.

“Yeah - um," hummed Franklyn. “Can’t remember her name, the little brunette that bosses Nigel around like he’s fresh outta boot camp.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of her.”

“She comes around every so often to see off his students.” Franklyn abandoned his attempt at memory with a shrug. He drained the last of his beer and sighed. “I’m sure I’ll remember her name when I see her again.”

The look Hannibal flashed Will was searching.

“Was Nigel supposed to meet you guys today?” Turning toward the setting sun, Franklyn lifted an hand to his eyes. “It’s almost nightfall. Don’t tell me he’s traveling at night.”

When Franklyn turned back toward them, his mouth was downturned in thought. “Going through the forest at night is…”

Will raised a brow.

“Well, you don’t want to walk through the jungle at night, I can say that.”

“Is there a chance he got lost on the way here?” Will asked Hannibal, but Franklyn replied, rushed.

“No, no.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Nigel knows what he’s doing. He may have taken longer than expected and dug in somewhere for the night. That’s what everyone should – would do.”

Hannibal looked through the aft windows of Franklyn’s home, chewing his lip in concern.

“What do you think?” Will’s voice was clipped.

With a sigh, Hannibal turned toward Will’s look of equal concern. “Nigel has to know what he’s doing. He wouldn’t have stayed here so long if he didn’t.”

“There’s a chance he got caught up with something and could meet us tomorrow.” Will fiddled with the faded label of his beer bottle. “He carries a satellite phone, doesn’t he? Can you call him?”

“Mhmm, I’ll call him,” murmured Hannibal. He turned to Franklyn. “Is there a chance we can stay here for the evening? I have *boliviano –”*

“Oh!” Franklyn exclaimed, eyes darting toward the upper deck above them. “Ah – yes, of course. The cabin upstairs is a bit cramped but the couch down here pulls out. You guys are absolutely welcome to crash here tonight. No money necessary, *mi casa es su casa.*” He stood from the table abruptly. “Just let me get some blankets for you, I’ll be back…”

Will watched Franklyn nearly scramble up the aft staircase and turned to Hannibal, quizzical. Franklyn was an enthusiastic host and Will couldn’t figure out if he was pleased to see fellow Americans or if he was just easily excitable.

Or maybe jumpy would be the correct description.

“Let’s get our stuff.” Will stood, offering a hand to help Hannibal upward. Hannibal’s palm engulfed his with warmth and he smiled encouragingly. “I’m sure he’ll be here tomorrow, with a good excuse.”

Their abandoned packs threw long shadows over the middle of the dock, but Will stalled as a hunched, carefully stepping man in dark clothing beckoned them to the edge of the river. Will looked over his shoulder and Hannibal shrugged behind him. They left their packs behind once more as they stepped off the dock and greeted the man uncertainly.

He was smiling, face lined with deeply set grooves of age and chattered too quickly for Hannibal to understand.

“What does he –”

“One of the witch doctors I told you about,” Hannibal laughed low.

The man reached for Will’s arm, examined his palm briefly before lifting it to his low brow, eyes closed in careful concentration. He lifted his own thin palm to Will’s forehead and chattered on, pointing at Hannibal standing behind.

Will was frozen, cross-eyed as he studied the fine veins standing from the wrist between his brows and mosquitos whizzed past his ears. “Hannibal -”

“I have no idea,” he toned. “Just let him finish, I guess. Don’t want to piss off any holy men.”

Finished with his speech and nodding in satisfaction, the man lifted a thin satchel from the folds of his coats and pressed it into Will’s hands. He held out a palm expectantly.

Hannibal didn’t bother hiding his mirth as he handed over a slip of pink billfold. The witch doctor bowed with a tobacco-stained grin and turned away to shamble into the shadows of town. Will and Hannibal stood together in the gathering dark, owl-eyed and dumbfounded.

“Did we just get swindled by a hokey witch doctor?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” Hannibal clapped a hand on Will’s shoulder and Will listed to the side. “What did he give you?”

Opening the satchel, Will tipped the contents into his palm. Several hard and shriveled kernels fell from the bag as one tumbled to their feet.

“Purple corn?”

A snort from Hannibal lifted Will’s head. He scowled.

“We can ask Nigel what that’s all about tomorrow,” Hannibal said, squeezing Will’s shoulder and steering him onto the dock. “Let’s go to bed. I’ll call him in the morning if he hasn’t shown by then.”

Chapter End Notes

The little snippet about untamed frontiers is from the Daniel Radcliffe film Jungle. It was also inspiration for this story.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will & Hanni set off to meet Nigel on the trail to his station. Will touches something that he shouldn't.

Chapter Notes

I really like Franklyn's character in this story, he's a little strange. The Liana flower is posted here. This one is called Japanese Honeysuckle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nigel hadn’t arrived the next morning. By the time Will and Hannibal were finished with Franklyn’s gracious breakfast provisions, a hastily fried fish and chimichurri, they were repacking their bags while the sun rose high in the clear skies.

“If you don’t mind filling our flasks, I’m going to call Nigel.”

Hannibal had been quiet during their meal and Franklyn kept Will engaged with robust tales of his ports along the Rio Negro. His travels with his wife Liv were the romantic, idealistic whimsy of worldwide backpackers chasing the nearest high or latest adventure recounted by fellow bohemians. Will could barely catch his words, he often chittered excitably and the sickly-sweet aroma of something like vanilla on his breath over the table was disconcerting. Will had begun to postulate why his wife had left him as he nodded along with his stories. Franklyn was a thrill-seeker, a people pleaser who took flighty risks and likely developed a dependency on the sweet Singani, a clear brandy of Alexandria grapes Will spotted being shared between many locals in Bolivia.

Noticing Will’s glance, Hannibal stood from the rickety dining table between them and stepped on the deck of the houseboat. His brick-like satellite phone was heavy as he lifted it to his ear. The chirp of a dial tone connecting his call loosed a sigh of relief he hadn’t known was perched in his chest.

“-llo?”

Hannibal’s breath caught. “Nigel?”

“ – ittle – hear from – oon!” Droning stretches of static punctuated Nigel’s greeting.

“Nigel, I can’t understand what you’re saying,” Hannibal near shouted. He spun in place, hoping to catch a better signal around the deck and pulled the phone from his ear to frown at its screen. “Are you on your way? We’re in Talaba.”

“About – hours from Talaba – wait a sec –” More staticky tones followed but after a moment, Hannibal heard branches snapping over the line as Nigel swore at his phone in frustration. “Is this better?”

Another sigh of relief surprised Hannibal. Concern over his brother’s delay had been niggling at a fear deeply buried behind his more rational thoughts. He smiled at the murky waters of the Rio Negro as he balanced a hip on the railing of the boat. “Yes, it’s better. We’re here in Talaba waiting for you. Are you alright?”

“I’m just fine Hanni, although I’m in a goddamn tree right now because that’s the only way to get a proper signal. This phone is fucking ancient,” huffed Nigel. He was winded and sounded a little more than weary. “Did you guys get there last night? I’m about six hours away from you but I’ll be on my way again once I get back on the path.”

“Did you get lost yesterday?”

Another loud snap of a branch interrupted Nigel’s reply and he cursed again. “I should be there after noon but if you felt like heading toward me in the meantime we can cut a lot of this hike short. Woah –”

A loud screech of an unknown and obviously enraged bird shrieked over the line and Hannibal pulled away from the racket in his ear.

“Nigel?” Hannibal barked, standing from his lean in alarm.

“Fuck off, you –” A loud crash of branches and more angry screeches followed. Hannibal could only listen and imagine Nigel battling with a furious bird while clinging to the precarious limbs of a tall tree. “Gimme a second.”

A muffle of scratchy fabric and more curses came through the line.

“Still there?” Nigel was more winded when he spoke again and could be heard brushing off his clothing with rough swipes of his hand. “These finches are a menace, yo - n’t believe how territorial they are. I wasn’t even going for its nest.

Loosening the tight grip on his phone, Hannibal shook his head. “You want us to meet you on the trail?”

“- you – o’nt mind.” Nigel’s reception grew spotty once more. “ – a path across the riv – east about half a kilo – north.”

Brows knitted in frustration, Hannibal turned to look up the river. “You want us to cross the river head north and follow a path about half a kilometer away?”

“Exactly.” The line cleared again. “I’ll keep heading toward you and we should meet up in a few hours. Then we can stop where I camped last night before finishing the trail tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Sure. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Alright. I’m excited to see you man, it’s been too long. Now I gotta get out of this fucking – “

The line went dead. Hannibal looked to the phone in concern. *CALL FAILED* filled the square screen of his phone and Hannibal would hyperventilate if he kept sighing so deeply.

“Is he on the way?”

Spinning sharply, Hannibal was surprised to see Will leaning against the houseboat railing behind him, concern lifting his brows. Hannibal nodded, tucking his phone into his shirt pocket and trying to smile. “We can follow a trail up north a while and meet him before he gets here, if you’re alright with that.”

“Sure,” Will’s returning grin was a comfort. “I’ll get our bags if we’re going now.”

Franklyn was absentmindedly twirling patterns in the rough material of his old couch as they ducked into the cabin. He started, jerking to attention as Hannibal announced their departure.

“Leaving now?” He ran a hand through his tangled locks and blinked as if clearing his vision. He took his time to stand but a wide grin of pleasure bared straight teeth. “Well shoot, Nigel got here quick. Is he gonna stop to say hi? It’s been months.”

He looked past Will, expecting Nigel be boarding the boat behind him.

“He’s going to meet us on a trail up north before we heading east to his camp. Do you know it?”

“Sure, sure,” Franklyn tucked a thumb into the pocket of his shorts and lifted to his toes as he pointed. “Just cross at the rope bridge about ten minutes that way and follow the larger path to the right. Can’t miss it.”

Even in bright daylight, the overhang of dense foliage toward the north of the jungle was dark and promising adventure.

“Can I offer you both a beer before you head out? You’ll need the hydration,” he said with a chuckle.

“No thanks,” interjected Will, incredulous. “Thank you for letting us stay, that was a big help.”

“Happy to help fellow adventurers. You’re bound have some real fun out there. Be careful,” said Franklyn.

Neither Will nor Hannibal could discern his wink.

-

“Franklyn’s a drunk, right?” Will called to Hannibal ahead.

They’d been hiking along an overgrown trail of Cashapona palm that dropped thousands of green, berry-like seeds to squish pleasingly under the toe of Will’s boot. The seeds smelled citrusy when they burst, clarifying and sharp. He could see why they were called the ‘walking trees.’ Their abnormally tall root systems sprouted high above the ground, stretching toward shade and nutrients, giving the appearance of long, gangly legs stepping over the underbrush of the forest. They were surrounded by a twisting maze of woody knees nearly as tall as Will.

When Hannibal turned around, crooked grin spread by plush lips, Will’s breath caught. He was always struck mute if Hannibal’s smile caught him off guard, whenever Will forgot he was in the company someone so dazzling. He covered his surprise with a swipe of the sweat from his brow.

“I thought so too.” Hannibal’s voice carried above them. “He’s been alone for too long, it seems.”

“Friendly, though. Jovial.”

“He probably doesn’t get much opportunity to speak English. It must have been nice to hear his native tongue.”

“I wondered why he stayed.”

“His boat didn’t look like it was in the best shape.”

Humming, Will continued in Hannibal’s footsteps.

“Look.” Stopping, Hannibal waved Will forward.

He was pointing to a small mound of upraised dirt beside a flat rock, bearing burnt incense sticks and small figurines wrapped in dried leaves and vine. Tilting his head as he stood by Hannibal’s side, Will recognized the figurines.

“Those same statues were in the witches market,” he said, kneeling to peer closer. “What are they for?”

“It looks like the protective shrines you would see in Mexico, the ones for patron saints.”

“Mmm, I know them. Do you think it’s an offering?”

“Could be.” Lowering his camera to the shrine, Hannibal snapped a quick succession of photographs. “Another question for Nigel. We’re going to have lots to talk about.”

They passed more shrines as they continued, in the gnarled hollows of towering ironwoods, half-hidden under fallen banana leaves and choked by the tendrils of various parasitic vines.

“The Aymara are a superstitious bunch, aren’t they?” Will noted as they passed their seventh shrine, voice low and lip shining as he nibbled loose skin. “An anthropologist would have a great time out here. I’ve got some friends at Columbia who would love to accompany you next time.”

“If you accompany them,” Hannibal said easily, “I might allow it.”

Will was amazed that Hannibal hadn’t even turned to part a jesting wink.

“Do you want to stop for lunch once we get to a clearing?”

-

As Hannibal spread a jute mat to rest upon, Will hunted for a likely place to relieve himself. The sun pierced the jungle canopy in long beams of light that blessed the earth with precious photons all the plants clamored toward. They climbed and twisted along larger trees, reaching for the giver of warm life, and the most successful of vines and creepers stood tall and strong. Warm, musty earth and decaying detritus scented the jungle around him.

When he turned back toward Hannibal and the clearing, an alluring scent, heavily spiced ylang-ylang stopped Will in his tracks.

He knew that scent.

Following his nose, he was led to a large palm being strangled by a climbing plant with long flexible stems twisted tight around its trunk. In the wide beam of a large sunspot, the plant was illuminated to brilliance.

Will knew this plant to be a flowering Liana; it was one of the vines he came to study. Broad, flat leaves supported floral stems of yellow and white spirally arranged petals. The Liana was remarkable to Will when he first studied them, one of the few strangling vines to reproduce asexually. Its pistils were topped with opposing ovaries for parietal reproduction; it could mate with itself.

But this Liana was odd, many of its thick vines were smooth, hanging over the forest floor with blunt ended appendages that dripped a clear, sticky-looking sap to the ground below. He didn't know Lianas had a sap like this. Liana were usually water-bearing and one could use them in a pinch for emergency hydration but it's fluids were never so thick or slow-moving.

And Will had never smelled one quite so alluring.

Careful to avoid the pools of sticky sap on the ground, he was drawn in by a fragrance that raised goosebumps along his skin. He examined the vines carefully before remembering he was a professional who was prepared for such a moment. He straightened with excitement. He must sample the sap for later study. Will ran back to the clearing, rushing a short explanation to his baffled companion while gathering test tubes and pipettes from his pack. Hannibal was left behind, laughing at Will's enthusiasm as he prepared their lunch.

The Liana was awaiting him, near glowing in its beam of light as Will fumbled with his gear. Uncapping the tubes and opening his pipette, Will piped samples of the sap from a few of the flower bunches. In his rush, he realized that he had forgotten the most basic of scientists' material.

He'd forgotten the nitrile gloves in his pack and cursed the rookie mistake as a vine dangling above him dripped a syrupy trail of sap on his knuckles. He wiped the sap from the back of his hand, intent on collecting more, but froze.

His hand was warming, skin beginning to tingle as a fresh trail of goosebumps ran up his arm. Will dropped his equipment.

"Oh shit," he whispered, staring in horror as the smear of sap reddened his skin.

The sap must be poisonous.

Will gasped, his breath catching as warmth spread to his fingertips and a shiver ran through him. It was absorbing through his skin, making a fine sweat dot his hairline and soon Will's entire arm was hot. Scrambling back from the Liana, he tripped over a root to fall on his rear. His palms were slick, the bumpy surface of the roots beneath them suddenly felt smooth and agreeably solid.

"*Fuck*, no," he panted, "what just –"

A tight ball of heat curled in his core and then burst to spread tingles of scorching bliss through him. He was burning, his stomach was clenching and a bewildering swelling in his groin frightened him to motion. Scrambling to stand, Will staggered back to Hannibal, cock swelling and gut aching.

Stopping short at seeing Hannibal in the distance, scanning over a thin notebook, Will was panting in surprise. Hannibal was so incredibly, breathtakingly beautiful that Will wanted to cry. He fell to his knees, calling out to him with a bleat of dismay.

Looking up, Hannibal's eyes widened and he dropped his book. "Will?"

"*Hannibal,"* groaned Will. He was rubbing his sweating palms over the scratchy fabric of his khakis and the friction made him shiver.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal cried, rushing to him.

"Hann – please help me," Will's clothing was so constrictive and he was far too hot.

Knees sliding in the dirt as Hannibal landed, he reached for Will's lolling head. "Did something –"

Catching Hannibal's outstretched arm, Will brought his hand to his cheek and moaned as he nuzzled into the warmth of his palm. "Why are you so beautiful, Hannibal? Have you always been so beautiful?"

"Will, what are you –"

When Will's hand brushed against his own, the sticky smear of sap caught Hannibal's fingertips and he gasped, pulling away to look at his fingers.

"Please touch me," panted Will, crawling close and tugging on the collar of Hannibal's shirt. "I don't know what's happening."

Jerking back, confusion lowered Hannibal's brows as he looked between his fingers and Will's pleading, watery-blue eyes.

"What happened?" Hannibal whispered, breath quickening. "What did you touch? My skin is –"

“I don’t know, please, just help me,” begged Will. With the strength of determination, Will gripped Hannibal’s shirt and tugged sharply to stretch cotton and snap stitching. He pulled until their mouths collided in a bruising kiss.

Will moaned against him, relieved as slick lips slid over his own. A whine of distress leapt from his throat when Hannibal pulled away, holding him back with wide palms on his shoulders.

“Will, something is – ” Hannibal’s voice was strained, he swallowed thick and a fine sheen of sweat glossed his brow. “We need to –”

“Please,” whimpered Will, twisting his fingers around the wrists holding him at bay. “I need to feel your skin.”

Hannibal screwed his eyes shut and groaned; Will was encouraged to see him affected so. The grip on his shoulders grew weak as Hannibal’s arms shook. It took little effort to brush his hands aside and push Hannibal to the dirt, climbing his long body and holding him still between firm thighs. Will tore his sodden shirt from his back, delighted as the air cooled him and pulled his straining length to dangle from the opening in his shorts. He started pushing into Hannibal’s clothing with one hand, whining in need as he stroked himself with the other.

He dove a hand under the waist of Hannibal’s trousers, incredibly pleased when he meets a sticky, half-hard cock twitching in his palm. The sap was affecting Hannibal strongly and he looked at Will in awe as his hips bucked forward of their own accord. Gripping Will’s burning cheeks, Hannibal pulled him down and they kissed, licking deep as Will rubbed the weeping tip of his cock against Hannibal’s stomach. Their mouths were tender, plump and sliding along one another’s in a kiss that promised oblivion but delivered nothing close to it.

As Will pulled a thickening length from Hannibal’s shorts, he couldn’t help but sample the smear of shining precome clinging to his wrist. He curled his tongue over the knobbed flare of his ulna, eyes shining with delight as bitter ambrosia coated his palette. Near growling, Hannibal pushed at him until they could part to bare themselves. They wrestled from their clothing; dirt, leaves and detritus clinging to their sweaty skin, entangling in their hair when they collided, pleasingly nude. They rolled together, grinding and moaning in encouragement until Will was astride his hips.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” Hannibal surfaced for air. “Please forgive me, I can’t help my –”

“Don’t apologize,” Will breathed into his ear, licking on along delicate flesh and twisting his fingers into fine, tangled locks of tawny hair.

Will rose to his knees and took them both in hand, stroking with the copious precome dribbling from their cocks. His skin was tingling, he felt heated and shivery at the same time. Will needed friction, he needed Hannibal’s skin and the undulations of his body to ease the burning in his core. He jacked them for a time, Hannibal groaning praise into the air through gritted teeth, gripping Will’s thighs to encourage a grind of his hips.

Hannibal’s pulsing cock looked delicious in his hands; Will needed to taste it. He slid down Hannibal’s form, licking his salted chest, knees smarting as twigs and sharp stones scraped his legs.

He swallowed Hannibal down eagerly. The velvety skin smoothing across his tongue was the most delightful sensation, the most perfect of textures, and he wished he could consume Hannibal, swallow all of him to keep him inside of himself. Will could do it; Hannibal’s flesh went on for miles and it was firm, warm, so delightful. Will worked his tongue, pushed deeper and closed his eyes. Blissed. He didn’t need to see the darkening forest, the rolling flesh of Hannibal’s furred stomach or the jump of twitching muscles under his hands. He didn’t need anything but the salty nectar coating his tongue, the solid cock pushing into his throat, and the satisfying tingling in his lips –

“Will!” Hannibal pulled at his hair and dazed, Will lifted, gasping deep, cold lungfuls of clean air. He blinked at the jungle blearily. Hannibal pulled him to lay atop him once more. “you –Yyou need to breathe –”

“No,” Will cried, throat rasping, “please, I need you.”

He rut against Hannibal’s sticky cock, pulled at his hair and kissed him forcefully, sharing the musk of his groin with a winding tongue. Hannibal was moving under him, stroking over his chest and dragging blunt nails down his spine, but it wasn’t enough. Will needed more. Will needed to expel the heat searing through himself, Will needed to consume Hannibal’s fervor, Will needed to glory in the violence of two eager bodies colliding with abandon.

With a harsh grip on Hannibal’s hip, Will flipped him to his knees and bent to bury his face between the reddened, dirt-streaked cheeks of his rear. Hannibal’s shocked gasp ended with a delirious moan as a warm tongue laved over his flesh, over his reddening skin and over the sensitive, furled entrance of his body.

Delighted, Will sunk sharp teeth into Hannibal’s fleshy rear and grinned as he jerked in his hands. He held a cheek aside with a slippery grip and rubbed questing fingers over smooth skin. Hannibal’s knees stiffened, he was shuddering and moaning encouragement when the tips of two fingers breached him to stroke within the very rim of his hole. Will spit on him, pressing foamy drool into his body and slathering over him until spit dripped down his balls in a cool path. Will was salivating heavily; the stretched flesh of Hannibal’s entrance was so soft, so delectable, so alluring and he couldn’t resist rubbing his stubbled cheeks and tingling lips over the offering before him.

The crevice of pinkened flesh between Hannibal’s cheeks was entirely soaked, messy with sweat and Will’s lingering spit and Hannibal was panting, cheek pressed into dead leaves and loosening soil as he wrapped a hand around himself, squeezing tight. The sway and tug of flesh of skin before him was too much to bear alone, and Will lifted to rub his streaming cockhead over soft, aching flesh. Will groaned as he sunk the very tip of himself into a body below that was suddenly so very still. His eyes glued to the swallow of pink, taut skin around him, he gritted his teeth before yanking Hannibal’s hips back as he thrust forward with a growl.

Hannibal’s grunt was punched from deep in his chest.

“*Fuck Hannibal* – I’m sorry –” Will groaned. His head was swimming, heat blasted through his loins. He set a rough, punishing pace as Hannibal’s rear collided with his digging hips. Hannibal was moaning into the dirt all the while, fingers scoring grooves into the earth.

Will didn't have the ability to be ashamed of such a quick orgasm. It was barreling down on him with indomitable speed, and he could only hold on to Hannibal's jumping hips as his balls drew tight and he stiffened ever harder. He burst, thrusting wild into the tight squeeze of Hannibal's hole as it pulsed around him.

His cock was pearlescent and slick as he pulled back only to thrust harder, deeper, jarring Hannibal forward as his knees slipped over wet leaves and broken sticks. Mud was buried under his fingernails; small twigs were snapping in his grip. Will was spinning. He had already come but his body, *the sap,* was demanding more from the warm, slick flesh around his length. His cock wasn't softening, and Hannibal was still moaning, still jerking himself fiercely despite the stringy ejaculate dangling from his knuckles.

"Hann – Hannibal, I don't know what to –"

In a whirl of snarling teeth, Hannibal turned to push Will onto his back and sat atop him, grinding with force. He pressed his length down onto Will's with the heel of his palm, spreading shining smears of come over his belly and rutting into the pressure between them. Their cocks were still streaming, constantly weeping, mourning every moment they weren't buried deep in willing flesh.

"*Fuck!* Hannibal, please," Will shouted, hands shaking as they gripped Hannibal's jerking hips. "Please, just do something, I can't handle this."

Hannibal descended upon him, biting at his lips with edged teeth and drawing upon his tongue as if he could drink life straight from him. He gathered a glistening pool of ever-oozing slick into his fist. He covered Will's cock with more come; the thick, veined skin between his fingers was intensely colored. Will was watching him with a feral grin, drugged, and viciously pleased with the smattering of dirt on Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal lifted, rubbing the flare of Will's spongy cockhead against his hole and he grunted, head tilted back, as he sunk down onto him.

"Yes," Hannibal growled. "Fuck me, come on."

Hands stiffening, Will's fingernails buried into Hannibal's thighs, running streaks of brilliant red over his skin. Hannibal was delirious and frustrated, and knocked Will's hands away as he fucked back onto the meaty length inside of himself. Head tilted to the shadowy treetops, Hannibal was soundless as relieved tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Fu - just like - don't stop please, I'm going to come," Will cried, voice pitched and straining.

Hannibal's eyes flew open as a single grunt of surprise burst past his lips. He stroked himself quickly, shuddering as ropes of thin, watery spend burst over Will's chest. He kept grinding, thighs working, burning as he rolled over and around the jerking cock that was pouring more sticky seed into him.

"Fuck!" Hannibal shouted into the air, voice returning. "I can't stop it, Will –"

"Please don't stop, you feel so good-" Will stiffened under him again; a steady pulsing and tight strain of Will's body filled him with more fluid. It gushed from his hole with every thrust of his hips, staining their skin, aiding the slip of their bodies against one another.

They were each astounded, delirious and helpless to continue fucking until their vision blurred, darkening into oblivion.

-

The side of Will's face was cold and a little wet. But the cushy material under his cheek was nice. Attempting to roll over and find a dry spot to lay his head, the sharp ache in his thighs stopped him and his eyes flew open with surprise. He was laying in a tent, nude and suspiciously sticky, while the bouncing light of a fledgling fire cast his shadow onto the wall of nylon before him. He groaned, rolling onto his back with effort. He squinted at a dark spot of drool spread beside him, soaked into the squishy padding of his sleeping bag. His own sleeping bag. His own tent, surrounded by darkness filled with multitudes of shrill, screaming insects navigating the night.

Will had woken alone, sore and confused, unsure of how he had gotten there. The last thing he could remember was –

A long body rolling in his hands, digging his fingers into grooves of firm muscle, his voice cracking as he called out -

"Oh fuck," he breathed, covering his face with grimy, musky-smelling palms. He jerked from the scent of his hands in horror. They smelled like himself, and like Hannibal's –

"No, no no," groaned Will. He pushed himself to sitting, noting a heavy weariness in his limbs and noting quiet voices outside. He dressed from his nearby pack gingerly, clothing sticking to the dirtier parts of himself and unzipped his tent to poke his head outside.

He locked eyes with Hannibal immediately; he was seated in front of a small fire, arms around his knees.

"Do you feel like joining us?"

Will's blush could ignite entire forests and he wondered if it could be seen in the dim glow of the fire. He noticed the man next to Hannibal, nearly identical. He was immediately displeased with the small grin on Nigel's face. Will nodded, wild hair catching on the zip of the tent as he unfolded himself to stand before the fire, uncertain and ashamed.

"You must be Nigel." His voice was raspy with disuse. Or perhaps overuse.

Standing to shake his hand, Nigel's grin widened. Will refused to look down and see if Nigel wiped his hand on his pants.

"Yep. Pleased to meet you," Nigel paused. "Again."

Brows coming together, Will fixed him with a questioning look.

“Nigel,” Hannibal scolded.

Chuckling, Nigel held up a placating hand. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, it’s not the first time I’ve run into a couple going at it like rabbits in this forest.”

Swallowing thickly, Will closed his eyes as shame burned through him. “You – um –”

“Hanni said you got a hold of one of the Lianas.”

Lips pursed tight, Will opened his eyes again. Nigel’s face was lined more heavily than Hannibal’s and the mirth wrinkling the corners of his eyes softened an overall rakish look.

“Sure did.” Will cleared his throat.

Nigel bid him to sit with a small laugh before turning toward a small table of plates and silvery utensils that shined in the firelight. He handed Will a plate of lumpy grains and stripped meat before seating across from him.

“Alberta’s botanical society sent myself and another down here a few years back, as Hanni might have mentioned,” started Nigel, stretching long legs in Will’s direction as he settled. “We were studying carnivorous plants when we came across the same Liana. Had the same – uh – *troubles* as you and my brother did.”

Near choking on his spoonful of earthy grains, Will swallowed quickly and wiped his mouth. “You did?”

“It was real awkward, let me tell you what. But Liana sap wears off after a few hours, as you can tell. With few lingering side effects. Heh, a few bumps and bruises were the worst of it for me.” He raised a thin brow at Will. “The locals are really good at reproducing here, if you hadn’t noticed.”

Nigel’s easy jokes weren’t helping Will’s mood. He couldn’t even bring himself to look at Hannibal again.

“Stop it, Nigel,” Hannibal warned. “Are you alright Will?”

Forced to look at him, Will chewed his lip as he nodded at Hannibal’s chin. It wasn’t difficult to tell that Hannibal’s following silence was reluctant. With a small sigh, he turned to his brother.

“Why have I never heard of this plant before? Why hasn’t anything been published about it? Why don’t more people know about it?”

Will finally looked up. The clever persistence of Hannibal’s curiosity was something Will had always admired, what initially drew Will to him. He hadn’t even seen Hannibal’s headshot under the excerpt of his plant epidemiology journal before he had devoured the text, before he vowed to study under him. When he finally finished the article and learned of its author, he was enraptured by the curve of his cheek, by the steadiness of his gaze and Will avowed anew. He would always adore the man’s thirst for answers.

“Oh, its well known around here.” Nigel leaned forward to poke a stick at the fire. “The locals know better than to touch it.” He looked between them both. “And you two, both assuredly being distinguished scientists in your field, should know better than to touch an unknown species without cover.”

“That’s not –” Hannibal started.

“It wasn’t his fault,” interjected Will, sitting forward with desperate emphasis. He met Hannibal’s look, regret filling his eyes. “It was mine. I wasn’t thinking – I’m – I’m sorry. That ordeal was entirely my fault and I feel terrible.”

Looking away again, Will couldn’t hold his gaze. Nigel stopped poking at the fire and Will knew if he looked up, he would see twin frowns of concern.

“It’s alright, Will,” Hannibal soothed as an aborted movement twitched his arm. “I’m not upset. It was an accident.”

Will dropped his plate between his feet, stomach rolling as he willed himself not to vomit. The silence around the fire was thunderous and Will’s head was pounding as the piercing trill of the jungle’s nightlife threatened to perforate his eardrums.

“The botanist I came with knocked me clean out,” Nigel started, head tilted forward as he stared into the fire. “After we woke up. The little ones can really drill that fist into ya.”

Will and Hannibal stared. Shrugging, Nigel resumed poking at the fire. “Damn irresponsible of her. It’s not like I could afford a concussion after fucking what little brains I had left out of my skull.”

Grimacing, Hannibal shut his eyes in embarrassment.

Nigel threw Will a sidelong glance and Will suddenly understood the purpose of his story. Will had to cover his mouth to stifle a snort, despite himself. He was terribly grateful for Nigel’s incredibly inappropriately-timed epithet. At the noise, Hannibal opened his eyes and relief smoothed his brow when he saw the mirth on Will’s face.

A reluctant grin spread under Will’s hand, and he dropped the futile cover with a shaky laugh. “You’d make a great politician, Nigel.”

Grin back in place, Nigel winked. “Happy to help.”

Returning to his meal, Will nodded at Hannibal. “You’re welcome to throw one at me if you’d like.”

“I could never punch you, Will,” Hannibal sighed, reclining on an elbow. “Can’t say the same to my brother here.”

“Think you could reach?”

Will sensed an age-old argument between brothers, as they volleyed insults back and forth. He finished his meal, grateful for the ease between them all and was looking forward to cleaning himself properly before falling into bed once more. The sticky aches of his body couldn’t be ignored for long and a deep, dreamless sleep felt like the antidote to all his worries.

As the fire burned low and the chill of the damp evening curled their limbs inward, all three cleared the campsite of food remnants before turning toward their beds. Nigel disappeared into the darkness, having strung a low hammock between towering madronas on the far side of the fire pit. Hannibal walked Will to his tent and Will scented the heavy smoke clinging to his clothing as they stood close, smiling lamely at each other in the low light of the evening. The salted undertone of earthy sweat floated through his senses and a sudden memory of Hannibal astride him, shaking through an orgasm and groaning his name tightened his throat.

“Goodnight,” said Will, looking away quickly, tugging on the hem of a sleeve.

“Y – okay,” Hannibal’s voice was low, hesitant. “Goodnight.”

It was going to be a long, uncomfortable expedition.

Chapter End Notes

I've hit an interesting wall in writing; I was so excited about this story at first but as I was editing, it lost some magic idk. If you've enjoyed it so far, please let me know and I can continue posting! I've gotten 2/3 of the story finished and it would be fairly easy to finish the rest since I've already completed the outline. Hope you enjoy!

<3
Lu

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Nigel leads them to his field station. Hanni wants to talk but he's awkward.

“I shouldn’t have eaten that much,” groaned Will, rolling onto his back on the ground, hands cradling a rounded stomach. “I can’t believe that was so filling. I just ate a few pieces.”

“We going to have to roll you down the trail?” Nigel chuckled, tossing their plates into his pack.

“Yes please.”

“If we left you here, you’d make a great breakfast for nearby panthers.”

“I’d already be stuffed,” huffed Will. “Like a thanksgiving turkey.”

“Oh man.” Nigel’s groan matched his own. “Why didn’t I think of that? The next rooster I shoot, I’m going stuff it with ground taro too.”

“I’m going to have to find taro when I get back to the states. That was fantastic. I could buy one for an entire day’s food. That would save me so much money,” Will rolled forward with another groan. “Hannibal, you know where I can get some?”

Looking up from tying his boots, Hannibal blew hair from his eyes. “Come to my place and I’ll cook for you. I can even teach you how to prepare it.”

“With fried pork?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, I love you,” Will sighed, standing to brush the dirt from his clothes.

“You have leaves in your hair.” Hannibal grinned, pointing. “I wouldn’t guess you need to be carrying the extra weight, with all that food you’re packing in your stomach.”

Shaking his head ineffectually, Will pulled a face as he stooped to gather his things before looking around their cleared campsite. Nigel was bent over his own and Hannibal’s gear, securing fastenings and tightening drawstrings while Hannibal straightened his clothing. Will packed the last of their cooking supplies and stood at attention.

“We ready?”

After eerily similar nods of assent, Nigel led Hannibal onto the trail toward his field station, with Will following closely. Will felt surprisingly energetic, having recuperated well after a good night’s sleep and a hearty breakfast. He’s grateful to be eating actual food instead of ready-made boxed dinners hastily scarfed over his apartment’s kitchen sink. To think, he was eating better now, miles from civilization in the southern Amazonian forests, than he did at home, where he had easy access to wide varieties of ingredients lining conveniently planned aisles of a supermarket. The jungle was beginning to grow on him.

Beginning a gradual incline to the peak of a valley, they were soon to be high amongst the occasional green macaws and trilling frogs. Animals were abundant, so early in the morning, eager to begin their days and curious about the outsiders traveling with them. Strangling vine was everywhere and Will was tempted to stop every so often to document their locations but knew he would only be stalling their progress. They still had two full days of hiking ahead. He tried his best to categorize the species as he went.

As Nigel held aside a tangle of vine so Will and Hannibal could pass, Will remembered the corn kernels he was given.

“Oh hey,” he dug through a pocket. “Have you seen these before?”

Will tossed the satchel of purple corn at Nigel’s chest as he passed.

Barely catching them, Nigel dropped the vines and followed.

He barked out a laugh. “Who gave you these?”

“A witch doctor in Talaba,” Will said as Nigel took up his stride. “What is it?”

“*Zea Mays*,” Nigel ansswered, holding a kernel between his fingers. “It’s supposed to be a – how do I explain this – it’s restorative.”

“Like healing?”

“No, more like replenishing certain – *fluids*,” said carefully, “lost after exertion.”

He wiggled his brows at Will with a feline smile.

Will stopped in his tracks.

The jungle was not growing on him at all, he decided. It was actually a hellscape and Nigel was his specifically assigned demon sent to torment him with ironically personal punishments.

“Did you eat any?”

“No I haven’t, thank you.” Will snatched the satchel dangling from Nigel’s fingertips and tutted in disgust, ears burning. Nigel’s chuckle trailed him as he rushed to catch up to Hannibal, pack bouncing against his back. Hannibal smiled at him as he arrived but didn’t comment in the red spreading down his neck.

They hiked, making good time down another sloping decline. Nigel followed close behind, describing his time in Bolivia, the locals and his travels around the world. Although overgrown, the path was easily followed most of the time, Will only needed to take the easiest route before him. Whether in the Amazon or on hunting trails in West Virginia, hiking was the same.

“We heard about the Juy-Juy in West Africa,” Nigel called forward, carefully stepping down from a dark outcropping of crumbling rock. “And followed stories through Chile until landing in Talaba. No one could describe it though, so for a long time we could only guess what we were looking for.”

“What does it look like?” Hannibal was balanced precariously on a damp log, holding onto broken limbs as he attempted climbing over.

“Mesmerizing, apparently. Like a deep purple spiral of broad petals that bunch along a long stem. With air roots.”

“That describes a lot of plants,” Will said, looking over his shoulder. “How will you know it when you find it?”

“They smell like over-sweet chocolate,” Nigel beamed.

Both Will and Hannibal laughed, shaking their heads before a thought struck Hannibal. “Is that what held you up when you were supposed to be meeting us?”

Clearing his throat, Nigel fiddled with the chest strap of his pack.

“No.” He looked sideways, foot sliding on a smooth stone. “I got a little turned around, so I had to backtrack for a few hours.”

Hannibal paused, incredulous. “Haven’t you lived here for years? You have to know this forest very well by now.”

“The forest changes,” Nigel said, distracted and airy. “Sometimes, it seems like I wake up to a completely new jungle around me. I never know what it’s going to do. You have to be on your toes.”

-

Nigel’s camp was spread wide, nearly engulfing the entirety of an inclined clearing, a bright spot of sunshine atop the dense darkness of the jungle. Will’s breath caught as he breached the last of the spindly neem fronds poking at his face; it was the expeditioner’s dream. A broad, stilted platform of raw ironwood raised high above the ground, screened in by dark mesh and covered with thick grass thatching spotted with solar panels. A jungle dwelling fantasy.

“You live here?!” Will whooped, a childlike burst of excitement swelling in his chest. He joined Hannibal at the base of an uneven staircase cut into the earth, looking up at Nigel’s camp with wonder. He elbowed Hannibal’s side. “I’m never going back. I’m burning my passport right now.”

With a low chuckle, Hannibal shook his head and ascended the muddy steps. “It is impressive. Did you build this, Nigel?”

“Nah,” Nigel tossed behind him, leading them up the stairs. “It was a biological hub before we got here. We took over after it had been abandoned for some years, but a lot of the workstation design was the same as what I use. So it was perfect.”

He swung open a screen door and ushered them inside. The open-air studio was dark but with a faint click, strings of bare bulbs above their heads illuminated the space and Will bit back another gasp of delight. The living area they passed through was sparsely furnished with aging bamboo couches and chairs but as they were led into the center of the station, Nigel dropped his travel pack on a roughly-hewn table and turned to Will and Hannibal with a proud smile. He pointed toward a cramped nook of tables and shelves filled with laboratory equipment, hiking and gardening supplies.

“This is my workstation, I’m sure you’ll become familiar with it soon,” Nigel explained, “The loft upstairs has three bunks and we’ve just passed the kitchen and lounge. The bathroom is past that bookshelf. Welcome to my home away from home.”

“It’s wonderful,” Will breathed, setting down his things. “I can see why you’ve stayed here for so long.”

“If you’d prefer to sleep alone, the hammock out on the deck has great views. But the squirrel monkeys get curious sometimes."

Well-used, hand drawn maps of the surrounding area covered multiple tables in Nigel’s workstation as Will passed to peer over his work.

“This is where you’ve found the unconscious animals?” He noted a patch of highlighted coordinates on a wrinkled page. “It looks like there’s an epicenter to their locations, is that where you and Hannibal will go tomorrow?”

Opening his pack next to Nigel’s on the dining table, Hannibal threw Nigel a quick smile. Nigel’s returning grin was sly. “Hannibal said you were smart. He wasn’t wrong.”

“Oh, come on.” Will leaned a hip on the table. “It’s obvious. What I can’t see here is a legend. How large is the area you have to search?”

“It’s hard to tell,” Nigel came to stand next to Will in his workstation. Placing tanned, heavily scarred hands down to frame the map, he hovered over the table, tilting his head to the side. “That spring there to the east, is where I found the iguana. It starts nearly seventy meters up and would take an entire day to explore that area alone. That’s about four kilometers away but on the other side, I found three anacondas at the edge of a swamp about eight kilometers north that was impossible to pass without having to hike for a couple of days around it. So, I haven’t had a chance to fully explore that area either. I can’t really tell how large the triangulation is until I make it all the way past the wetlands.

"I found a panther here but that’s about sixteen kilometers away and I would need to camp overnight if I wanted to finish surveying the area. But I wasn’t keen on spending the night alone somewhere with known predator activity,” He pointed to a red circle on the map before looking up to Will’s rapt attention. “I’m very thankful that you both came. I don’t have to do it by myself.”

“Known predator activity, you say,” noted Hannibal, coming up to stand beside the table. “How comforting.”

Nigel reached out a heavy paw to ruffle Hannibal’s hair. “The scary ones hunt at night, Hanni. We’ll be tucked safely into bed by then. Don’t worry. Let’s get your stuff to the loft.”

-

“The ones that smell like spiced vanilla or ylang-ylang,” Will explained, spreading out his journal. “You’ve seen ‘em, I’m sure.”

Leaning over his plate, Nigel peered at the photos clipped to the bedraggled pages of Will’s observation journal and hummed in recognition. “Oh yeah. They’re everywhere.”

Taking back his book, Will tucked it under a leg and continued eating. “A little *too* everywhere. My defense will explain why strangling vines like these have proliferated so heavily in the southern amazon for the past decade. They’ve been suffocating other plant life and preventing them from absorbing carbon dioxide properly. Chile’s seen exponential growth of manufacturing since the eighties and my guess is that the jungle can’t keep up with so much gas in the air. The Atacama desert is spreading east too quickly. So, if we can figure out why the Amazon is being beaten back, we might be able to slow the aridity, if not stop it entirely.”

The lift of Nigel’s brows was impressed. “I was doing something similar in central Africa, years ago. It’s a shame to hear the same thing is happening here.”

“Would I be able to use a table in your workstation to spread out some reports while you guys go out tomorrow?”

“I’ll clear out space tonight,” Nigel mumbled through a mouthful of rice, wiping his chin with the back of a hand. “Ah – but I’ve got some samples in a transport case that you’ll want to steer clear of. The big plastic beige one. You don’t want that spilling.”

With a grimace, Will was reminded of the last time he touched an unknown substance. He glanced at Hannibal who was studiously cutting into a strip of meat and nodded without saying more.

Night fell upon the field station as they planned for the day ahead. Will and Hannibal were looking forward to settling into the creature comforts of civilization after three evenings of sleeping atop loose soil and upraised roots. The jungle was welcoming during the day, alight with fresh life and sunlight but at night, when the winds stood still, the jungle became domain to stealthy creepies and crawlies that moved in the shadow of the moon, confident in the command of their environment. Though thrilling, being so low to the ground made the activity of such creatures uncomfortably apparent. Only the depth of sleep would deafen the noises of the night. Here, among the treetops around Nigel’s camp, they would sleep suspended over all the night’s animals; sleeping amongst airy dreams and beams of moonlight.

Bidding Will goodnight, Nigel left to prepare the loft for Hannibal after Will mentioned risking the hammock for the evening. Hannibal stepped from the bathroom, freshly showered and bare in the chest as Will was readying for sleep. Will ignored the trail of damp hair clinging to his lower stomach.

“Will you be warm enough?” asked Hannibal, flinging a thin towel over his shoulder. “I’m sure Nigel has blankets if it gets too cold.”

Swallowing down his nerves, Will nodded. They hadn’t been together alone since the day previous. “I’ll be fine.”

Hannibal took a careful step forward, leaning against the sofa and tilting until Will met his eye. “Can we talk about what happened?”

No, absolutely not, Will thought. But his fool head nodded again.

“You really don’t need to feel bad.” Hannibal’s voice was low. “Or apologize. It was no one’s fault.”

“It – it was entirely my fault, Hannibal,” Will insisted. “I was irresponsible when handling a plant I didn’t fully know. What if it - it could have been actually poisonous, we could have -”

“But it wasn’t.” Hannibal stopped Will’s stammering. “It was - *oddly stimulating* - but it wasn’t poisonous. Both of us are fine and now we know not to touch another by accident. Please don’t worry about a poisoning that didn’t happen.”

“A potential poisoning isn’t what I feel bad for.” Will’s meaning was clear as his eyes traced the frayed edge of a rug.

“You don’t have to feel bad about us – “ struggling to find a delicate word, Hannibal paused, “um, copulating.”

Will groaned, cheeks aflame as he ran his hands over his face and a raspy laugh made him peek over his fingers. “Please don’t say that word ever again.”

“Would you prefer mating? That’s probably more appropriate for the setting but –”

“Okay!” Will exclaimed, near shouting. “I’m going to bed, thank you for this conversation, let’s never have it again.”

He turned to the screen door, but Hannibal caught his wrist, pulling him to stop.

“Please Will,” Hannibal glanced down at his grip on Will’s arm before letting him go. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Sighing, Will looked up into the sincerity of Hannibal’s eyes. He rubbed his wrist, warm from Hannibal’s long fingers. “I’m okay, thank you. And I’m glad you’re okay and that you don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.” Hannibal shook his head, tendrils of dark, wet hair swinging over his ears. He huffed a small laugh. “If I wasn’t your advisor I would probably have appreciated –” Stuttering, Hannibal blinked quickly. “I don’t hate you. I’ve enjoyed our time together.”

Will was astounded as he realized what Hannibal nearly said.

“Thanks,” he said, uncertain. “I won’t touch new plants again, I promise. We don’t want to get in the way of the job we have to do here.”

“I won’t,” Hannibal said quickly, clearing his throat. “I mean, *we* won’t.”

“You didn’t touch the plant.”

“I meant we won’t let it get in the way.”

“Eh –” Will’s brow furrowed. “We won’t let *what* get in the way?”

The pause between them was stiff.

“I’m sorry Will, I must be tired.” A flush was spreading across Hannibal’s chest as he stepped back and Will looked up in surprise. “I’ll go to bed now, I think. Thank you for listening to me.”

Confusion was bouncing Will’s bright eyes between Hannibal’s and his lip was white under his teeth. “Did you mean to say you enjoyed our time together with the Liana sap?”

The grip Hannibal had on his towel was tight, as was his reply. “It wasn’t terrible.”

After wheezing an incredulous laugh, Will composed himself quickly. “No, it wasn’t.”

“I’m glad we agree.”

Where this unfortunate conversation was supposed to go, Will didn’t know. “I’m going to go to bed now.”

After a jerky nod, Hannibal bid him goodnight.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

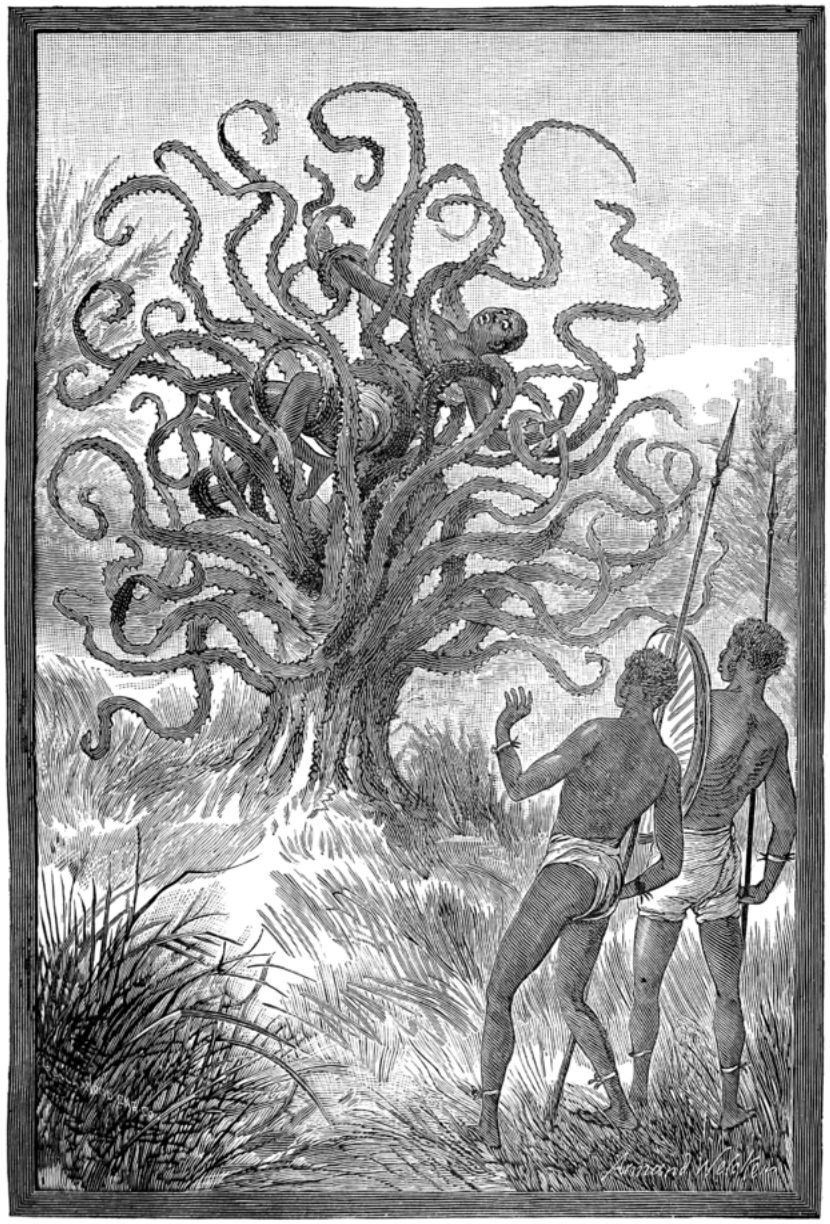
As Nigel and Hannibal set out in search of the Juy-juy, Will is left to start work on his dissertation. He leaves the field station for categorical photos of strangler fig varieties. He has a hard time.

Chapter Notes

The first image here is a really neat picture of a mature strangling fig that killed its host. The host tree dies and disintegrates, leaving only the hollow fig, shaped as the host's skeletal remains. Fucking cool (sorry about the watermark.)

And the second image is the unfortunate inspiration I had for the Arbor Diavolo, so far as color, shape and texture goes.

The image after is the first concept for the Diavolo, found on the page that originally inspired this story.



THE YA-TE-VEO, OR CARNIVOROUS PLANT.

Leaving Will distracted and mumbling over pages of hastily drawn notes, Hannibal and Nigel departed from the cabin while the earliest tendrils of morning light were creeping through the treetops.

“Do you have to report *everything* that happens while you’re here?” asked Nigel, skirting past a thin bramble of stinging nettle.

“It’s up to the documentarian,” Hannibal said, crooked smile revealing a canine. “And from the color of his cheeks last night, I would say he’ll choose to omit some parts of our trip.”

“Now I’m curious about what other emissions – sorry, *omissions* – he’ll choose to keep to himself.”

“Don’t be crass, Nigel. That was a difficult experience for Will. He doesn’t need you making things harder for him.”

“I’m going to ignore the obvious joke there,” Nigel called over his shoulder. “Was the experience difficult for you as well?”

The silence following his question made Nigel turn to look at his brother. Hannibal had a frown of careful consideration curving his lips.

“Was it a lot to take in?”

Tutting, Hannibal’s features flattened. “Stop.”

“I will if you answer my question.”

“Yes, it was a lot to take in.”

The bark of laughter from Nigel's chest sounded like it hurt. "Hannibal, oh man – I meant - I asked if the experience was difficult for you."

Hannibal scoffed as mortification colored his cheeks. "It wasn't exactly a hardship."

As he drew near, Nigel clapped him on the shoulder with a heavy hand and winked. "I've seen how he looks at you. And you're not discouraging it."

"He's my student."

"Maybe in Maryland. But out here, he's just another scientist. No?"

"No. He is still my student. And stop being immature before I make you hunt down this flower on your own. Panthers be damned."

"Oh, come on," toned Nigel. "It's been years since I've seen you. I have to tease my little brother just a bit. Its nearly obligatory."

"Me helping you is not obligatory, keep that in mind." Hannibal pulled from under his hand to lead down the bark-strewn path.

"It's duly appreciated."

"Find the damn animals, Nigel."

"We still have a ways to go."

Before they left that morning, Nigel had explained their task for the day. On several of his excursions, he found various unconscious animals to the east of his camp. Never finding them in the same spot, he said it was likely that the animals were dosed by the Juy-juy, and while some could succumb to its effects immediately, the larger animals must keep moving for a time before the spores do what they intend. He'd triangulated from where he'd found nearly a dozen sleeping animals; chubby tapirs, limp anacondas, an iguana and the panther he mentioned the day previous. Nigel had a decent idea of where the Juy-juy could be found, but they would need to search around for a while before returning back to camp for lunch. He hoped they would at least find another animal to sample from if they didn't find their quarry.

"Can you tell me anything more about the Juy-juy?"

"Only what the Aymara have told me," Nigel said with a long-suffering sigh, holding up a wayward branch for Hannibal to pass under. "It's a tree-climbing vine, like the ones Will's searching for. It uses a larger species as a higher perch in an attempt to outsource the height it doesn't have on its own naturally. You won't see anything but long vines hanging down from tree boughs that blend in with any other vine in the forest. The only way to find it is either by smell, like a sickly-sweet chocolate, or by looking at trees above you as you walk. You'll see dark, tightly curled buds during the day that open at night to dangle overdeveloped pistils over the forest floor."

"Your tentacles." Hannibal was sarcastic.

"Yes, my tentacles," Nigel hummed. "They're supposedly ten feet long, thick as your wrist and they open at the ends to spray some sort of pollen that knocks out prey. Once asleep, the vine and pistils will gather an animal, lift it to whatever host tree its in and bind it to the boughs until its crushed to death."

"And then what?"

"You know, I don't really know what. No one ever described what happens next. I assume the animal will rot over time and the plant will absorb it?"

"Nigel, this sounds like a myth," said Hannibal, hesitant.

"I've been chasing myths for years, you know that. Myths and legends are my career."

"How are we supposed to avoid being pollinated and absorbed? We're safe because we're looking for the plant during the day?"

"Yep," was Nigel's simple response. "So, keep an eye out for clusters of purple buds running along high tree boughs. But keep your mouth shut; you never know what could be pooping above you."

-

Leaning back, Will's spine cracked, realigning itself after hours of static bending over a worktable. He sighed in relief and smiled to himself. He'd gotten some real progress on categorizing the strangler varieties he'd passed as Nigel led himself and Hannibal on the last leg of their journey. He was particularly proud that he'd successfully categorized from memory. Now, he only needed photo documentation and the third chapter of his dissertation would be done.

The sun was warming the field station to near stifling; being in the treetops was such a stark contrast against the darkness of the jungle below. Descending the long staircase, gear in tow, was like diving from the warmest of tropical beaches into the coolest, darkest of ocean abysses. Will promised himself he would only wander through the jungle for a little while, looking for exemplary strangler vines to add to his portfolio. Then he would head back to camp and meet with Nigel and Hannibal for lunch. Maybe they will have found the Juy-Juy and their venture would be a success in one short day.

Will needed pictures of the lattice-work root system that a strangling fig forms to envelop its host. If he was lucky, he would find a mature strangler near the camp. One that had killed its original host tree and left behind a hollow, columnar web of thick roots to stand on its own; the skeletal outline of an unlucky victim. He followed one of the paths Nigel cleared around his camp, head on a swivel as he passed through tangled mazes of thin bamboo, careful not to catch himself on their spindly thorns. The jungle was quieter today, only the occasional squawk of nearby

agitated parakeets stood out from the myriad cries of birds in the distance. Will felt alone, despite his feathery companions above, and it was an unusual comfort. He could be completely silent, quiet his thoughts and observe the shadowy vegetation in peace.

He was successful in finding scores of strangler figs. They stood out from their hosts, texturing their surfaces in a noticeable tangle of overlapping vines and roots. The Curtain Fig was a particularly spectacular find; it's roots making an impressive wall of cascading lines hanging from the tall bough of an ancient mahogany. Will found a *Watkinsiana* Ficus that stood tall amongst bent and broken trees that didn't survive a passing cyclone some years past. While parasitic, an older fig could support its host through tougher weather systems and leave the host upright while the surrounding plant life was blown to the ground. An occasionally symbiotic relationship.

After photographing the fruiting arms of a younger strangler, Will needed to head back to camp. He was hungry and curiosity demanded he sample one of the orange, spotty figs nearby but Will's experience with the Liana made him second guess his familiarity with the Amazon's offerings. He could actually be poisoned this time. Or worse. As he fought through tangled brush, Will cursed himself for wandering so far from the easily trod paths. He got caught up in the excitement of his discoveries. Still conscious of his direction, he left Nigel's trails behind and followed root system after root system until he was entrenched in undiscovered territory, marveling over the subjects of his studies.

Bursting into a dark clearing of damp earth, Will sighed in relief. The going would be easier until he crossed a trail back to the field station, scrolling through the captures on his camera as he walked. He had gotten pictures of four of the five species he needed and would hopefully find the fifth after lunch. He knew Hannibal would be proud of the progress he made; the thought warmed a small, undeniable bundle of pleasure in his gut.

"Oh –" Will stumbled over something, distracted with his camera. He trip over his own feet next and fell, curling to protect his gear and landing in soft loam that clung to his arms. He looked back to see an upraised root leading to a bent tree with oddly orange bark; colored like a thick marmalade. The tree loomed over him, wide and foreboding in the shadows, and a movement to Will's left startled him.

The root at his feet twitched.

Will blinked, frowned, unsure of what he'd seen.

The root twitched again and then slowly began sliding along the forest floor, impossibly lifting a heavy, dirt-crusted limb to hover beside the base of the tree. Clods of dark, coffee colored earth fell from the root as its blunted end dangled low.

"What –" Will gasped, scrambling back from the tree, heels slipping and digging furrows into the dirt. "What the hell?"

A susurrus of many heavy, slowly moving limbs turned Will's head and he looked around to see dozens of roots lifting from the shadowy grounds surrounding him. They shook, casting off a camouflage of wet leaves and damp earth that gave the appearance of striated wood roots to reveal fleshy appendages that curved and hovered in wait.

"*Oh fuck,"* whispered Will, carefully, quietly, rising to his feet.

Tentacles. Nigel's fucking tentacles.

Was this the Juy-Juy? He hadn't smelled any chocolate – there were no purple flowers to be seen. What was this plant?

At his words, the appendages, *the tentacles*, all stood to attention, lifting their blunt tips. They could hear him?

"You've got to be kiddi-"

The tentacles coiled, then rushed toward him with the vicious speed of a cobra strike.

Will yelped and dove aside, managing to avoid the fastest of the tentacles but landed across the broad, solid arm of another beside him, landing on his camera with a grunt of pain as the housing cracked against his ribs. Pale, twisting vines descended from the treetop, flagged with curling leaves to wrap around his waist and tug him toward the base of the tree, Will flailing and shouting all the while.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Will wailed. He twisted in the tree's grasp, digging thin nails into its flesh and raising fiery lines in his wake. "Help!"

He didn't know who he was calling for. It was useless to hope that Nigel and Hannibal were nearby, not when he foolishly wandered so far from the camp, after they left in the opposite direction hours ago. No one would hear him shout as a vine twisted around his wrist, tugging his sharp nails free. His pack was pulled from his shoulder, the strap of his camera lifted from his neck and a strong tentacle wormed around his leg, creeping toward his knee. "Let g-"

When another tentacle wrapped around his thigh, spreading his legs, Will gasped and animal fear pricked tears in his eyes. Wrists bound and arms jerking against the hold, Will was lifted from the forest floor. A scream tore through him. "*Please, please don't!* What the fuck is this? Let go of – get off!"

The firm limbs holding him suspended stilled, almost listening. A large tentacle rose to hover before his face and he was helpless to stare directly at the wide, blunt end of the root with fluttering, watery eyes. It was bulbous, ridged down its shaft and swaying in slow, sure movements. Will was caught; the unwilling enchanter of an arboreal snake. To his horror, a near invisible slit at the end of the tentacle began dripping a clear, slightly yellowed liquid, almost honey, that fell on his stomach. It was disconcertingly, terrifyingly warm and soaking into his shirt.

"Don't, I –"

As if waiting for its moment, waiting for Will to open his mouth, the tentacle darted forward, tunneling in, twisting, wriggling and forcing its way past his teeth. Will grunted in surprise and the tentacle swelled to throb and his throat was filled with thin, delicately flavored gel. He was distantly surprised to find out was barely honey at all.

Will swallowed.

He needed to breathe; it was the only way.

His last coherent thought was of how smooth the tentacle's flesh was as it pulsed over his tongue.

Will's head was floating, soul departing to the elysian fields as honey warmed his stomach and lit his nerves ablaze. He was heating, a sweat broke across his furrowed brow and his eyes were rolling as he was overtaken by a thrilling, delirious lust that tightened his groin and shook his core. The tentacle filling his mouth backed away, but Will couldn't allow it.

"More, please," he panted, parting his lips, tongue extended in welcome.

With a shiver of delight, the tentacle pushed forward and Will suckled and licked over its ridged flare, coaxing it to spill more honey. It writhed as if enjoying the slick suction of Will's mouth. His struggles against the tentacles became very different, he began rolling, moving with the firm tentacles holding him suspended in the air.

Thin, fledgling vines twisted around smaller tentacles, slipping under his shirt, dipping into his belly button briefly before sliding up his chest to wrap around his nipples and tug. Will cried out in surprise, in pleasure as trickles of warm honey slicked his stiffening nipples to run down his skin. Two more tentacles, seeming impatient, tore through the buttons of his shirt, ripping it from him. He jerked but the tentacles holding him were strong, distantly reassuring.

The tentacles around his thigh lifted and spread him to recline; he was supported by a bed of undulating, twisting roots that crept under his shorts to tear the rest of his clothing from his body. Moaning around the length in his mouth, Will was nude before all the forest, save for the glasses dangling from a sweaty, flaring nose. A thicker, burgundy tentacle came up between his legs and sputtered honey over his bared entrance. His hole started tingling and clenching around nothing as his cock started to fill.

"Oh fuck," Will groaned, as the tentacle in his mouth pulled away to allow breath. He needed more, anything more. "Please."

Honey droplets began falling from all the tentacles around him, the rains of aphrodisia, and he was soon covered in patches of heat that bloomed along trails of sticky warmth. It smeared his glasses, but he could still make out the tentacle between his legs swelling as more honey filled its length. The tentacle oozed, rubbing over him, around his rim, smearing his reddened taint and caressing smooth knobs under his heavy testicles. His clenching cheeks were dripping sticky goo to the forest floor, trying to milk something that wasn't there. Will thrusted against nothing, dripping cockhead bobbing in the air and he whined in desperation, tingling throughout.

He was too hot; sweat was dripping down his neck to trail down the grooves of his heaving chest. Urging the hold around him, Will raised his hands to the firm tentacle that still hung before his mouth and squeezed, pumping to usher more honey forth. All the tentacles around him shivered, the tree above him was vibrating, lush leaves shaking as fine droplets of rainwater fell to mist his body. It was surprisingly cool, refreshing, and Will groaned in relief.

The dark tentacle hovering between his splayed legs began pressing against him, gushing more hot, slick honey over his wrinkled entrance. It pushed forward with force and Will grunted in pain. "It's too big."

The tentacle pulled back, as if in contemplation.

And with bewildering intelligence, the tentacle tapered at its end, narrowing to a blunt point that it wriggled against him until it gained purchase. Eyes wide, Will let out a sharp cry of surprise as his cock, straining and vascular, swelled tighter as he was breached. The tentacle eased into him and the stretch, the slow burn of his rim was astonishing; he was moaning, whining encouragement. The tentacle pulled back and as the knobbed ridges of its shaft tugged on his hole, Will cried out. A bolt of heat ran though him and the tentacle fucked in slowly once more before gaining a steady rhythm of thrusts.

"*Fuck.* Please touch me." Fattened and tender, Will's pink cock needed something to fuck into, to rub against, but the tentacles ignored his request.

Multitudes of writhing, pulsing and slippery limbs wrapped around Will as he was fucked to hoarse shouting. The twin tentacles around his nipples were flicking, twisting and tugging them to red peaks of raw nerve as a flush of heat spread across his chest. He was moaning as the blunt tentacle returned to his mouth, pumping over his flattened tongue and feeding him the delicate nectar he was beginning to crave.

It was torture, the tentacle was feeding him the gel that only swelled him harder but it wasn't relieving him like he needed. Two tentacles wrapped under his knees, bending them to spread his legs wider as the larger tentacle fucked in deeper, with emphasis. It was punching deep groans from his chest and Will was soon to be overcome, untouched.

"Don't stop!" Will groaned, toes curling and eyes screwing shut. Each delicious tug against the rim of his body ratcheted his spine tighter, pitching his groans higher. He couldn't control the staccato moans from his throat as he was fucked ever harder. "F-fuck, I'm gonna - !"

Will came, moaning his pleasure after the tentacle in his mouth slipped from his swollen lips, job done. Another strong tentacle wrapped round his cock as it jumped, throbbing, to finally pump him of his stringy seed. He cried out in frustration and relief, eyes rolling as he came while thinner vines swiped the come from his cock and stomach with their curled leaves. They lifted to disappear into the greenery above. Will groaned, panting as the fleshy, dark tentacle continued enthusiastically fucking him.

He's soon over sensitized and cringing against each renewed intrusion. The tentacles kept their pace.

"No, I can't come again," Will moaned, stars drifting across his vision. Determined, the tentacle swelled larger. A firm knob of flesh grew along its length and began running over the nut of his prostate with devilish precision on every thrust. The tentacles turned him over, raising his hips high in the air as it curved into him to ensure Will's sensitive bundle of nerves was stimulated.

Astounded and shouting at the dirt below his face, Will uselessly tried to twist away from the tentacles, realizing that somehow the tree knows human anatomy and knows that prostate stimulation will make him come again. It was a wild concept to grasp. Did it want his sperm? He'd seen the vines lift into the tree treetops after licking up his come, despite being distracted as he was. What the fuck was it doing with it? The tentacle around his cock squeezed the base of him firmly, preventing blood loss and keeping him turgid. The tentacle in his hole fucked in faster, earning a yelp as a pale, swollen root slid under the tip of his cock. This tentacle's end widened, opened to engulf him; a perfect, wet, tight sleeve to fit over him and suckle his length. The honey inside of the tentacle was searing hot, tingling to the root of him and Will was shouting, tears streaming down his nose, falling to the earth as his spine curved to fuck into the tentacle's sleeve. He was bent, curled in helpless, animal rut as the tentacle inside of him pushed to encourage the motion. Will was being overwhelmed, shouting as he was milked; helpless against a monster tree that seemed determined to draw all it can from him. The sleeve around him tightened, pulsing and tugging at his cock until another fantastic, painful orgasm overtook him and the umber dirt before his eyes darkened to black.

-

Nigel stripped of his sweat-sodden shirt as soon as he tossed his pack on the sofa. The humidity was high that morning and even the barest of breeze through the field station was a relief. Wiping his shirt across his brow, he turned to Hannibal, who was looking worse for the wear.

"You get used to the heat," comforted Nigel.

Red in the face and fanning himself with a bandana, Hannibal sprawled across a creaking armchair. "Don't know if we'll be here long enough to get used to it. If our sample is of any help, that is."

"That was my first time being so close to a red howler," said Nigel, tossing his shirt aside and opening his backpack. He took out a sample transport case and shook it, wiggling his brows. "They're a lot nicer when they're not yelling."

Lifting a slim tube of dark blood from its slot of perforated foam, Nigel held it up to the light of the windows. "Think ten milliliters is enough?"

It was rare to see a Bolivian Red Howler monkey so far south in the country. Nigel had guessed its troupe had been pushed from northerly territories by another troupe, saving their offspring from the infanticide so commonly seen during battle. Finding a lone howler separated from its troupe was rarer still.

"It should be plenty," said Hannibal, head tilted back against the chair. "If we end up leaving sooner than later, I can bring anything we don't use back to the states for further evidence of your Juy-Juy spores."

"No need for that," Nigel quipped. "I won't – if we find one, I'll be sure to spread the word myself."

Sitting forward, Hannibal frowned, looking around. "Is Will here?"

Noting the empty workstation, Nigel stepped around a tall bookshelf to peek at the hammock outside. He shook his head. "Must have gone looking for figs."

A sharp canine was digging into Hannibal's lip.

"He said he wouldn't go far," reassured Nigel, "if he left to find his trees."

With a sigh, Hannibal stood from his chair to walk into the cramped kitchen. He had to trust Will to be safe in the jungle. Alone. He would think Will to take extra precautions after their experience with the Liana, so he must be safe. Running a hand through his damp hair, Hannibal could almost feel the silken tendrils of hickory ringlets curling around his fingers.

"If you keep sighing like that, you're going to pass out," Nigel called from the lounge.

"If I don't eat, I'm going to pass out," he retorted, rifling through cabinets filled with dry goods and unlabeled tins. "Do you want a sandwich?"

"Bread's in the fridge. And yes please."

A heavy loaf of dark bread lay wrapped in thick butcher paper beside conveniently placed slices of pale pork. Will would probably appreciate a ready meal whenever he came back from his explorations. With some bright slices of the sticky mangoes he'd seen not too far from –

A yelp in the distance stayed his musings, lifting from the trees behind the filed station. Pausing, Hannibal waited to hear more. Nothing but an irregular silence followed.

"Nigel, did -"

A shout interrupted him. Abandoning the sandwiches, he started toward the windows when another shout rose from the trees.

"Was that-"

"Get the first-aid kit under the sink and move," Nigel rushed, voice clipped. He sprung from the sofa, loping toward the exit. "That was English."

He slid a long machete from a sheath hanging beside the door and slipped into the bright sunshine outside, leaving the screen door to slam against its frame behind him. Darting back toward the kitchen, Hannibal tore through the storage under the sink, upending several unidentifiable bottles and cases, disregarding the mess as he lifted a black nylon case from the cabinet. He slung it over his shoulder and followed, speeding down the stairs outside.

They paused at the station's landing; ears pricked for more sounds of distress. Another shout, lower and pained, spurred them to motion.

“Stay close to me and do what I say,” Nigel ordered and they sped down a winding trail leading along one of the less traveled paths. He looked behind, marking the thin line of blood on Hannibal’s cheek as they ran past whiplike arms of thin palms. His bare chest and arms would soon look the same. “I don’t know what he’ll have found, and I need to know where you are at all times.”

Hannibal was too caught up imagining what Will had gotten into to respond out loud. He nodded in the affirmative. They continued, ignoring the stinging lash of vegetation seeking new purchase, rushing toward the direction they hoped would lead to Will.

Mouth set in a straight line, Nigel paused after a distance, breathing heavily through his nose and straining to hear anything human nearby. The jungle was silent, not a single animal trilled, not a branch swayed in the breeze; the jungle was holding its breath. A thrill of terror ran through Hannibal as he stopped short, his limbs growing cold with foreboding. They hadn’t heard anything from Will while they had been running for what felt like a very long distance.

A low groan carried through the jungle; Nigel’s head twisted sharply toward the noise and his knuckles whitened around the handle of the machete.

“Don’t touch anything if you can manage it,” he growled. Lifting the blade, Nigel began hacking through the plants, ducking under bent trees and climbing over crumbling logs.

Keeping a safe distance from the swing of Nigel’s arm, Hannibal lifted the kit from his shoulder. Nigel kept a comfortingly thorough first aid kit. Not only did Hannibal find the usual bandages and antiseptics, but he also marked sealed packages of curved suturing needles, a tube of tweezers and forceps, irrigation kits, burn patches and an array of antibiotics. Barring a lost limb or punctured organ, they would be able to care for Will until real help arrived, if needed. Loosing a slow breath, Hannibal readied himself for what they might find.

The going was slow, stuttered with Nigel’s halting to allow them to listen for indications of location and distress. They could only guess where Will was, he hadn’t made a sound for overlong minutes. Even if he was mere feet away the dense underbrush could hide his body if it were low enough to the ground. Nigel and Hannibal had to concentrate on every bramble and tangle of vine with each careful step. His fingers shaking around each handhold, Hannibal climbed over fallen trees and rocky outcroppings with a barely stable grip.

Another low moan lifted their heads and Hannibal gasped. They were close.

He jerked to run forward but a solid arm across his chest knocked the wind from him.

“Stay behind me,” rumbled Nigel, teeth gritted and eyes locked to a darkening tangle of understory.

Creeping forward with care, Nigel picked through the brush and Hannibal wanted to scream in frustration. It took considerable willpower and evenly measured breaths to prevent himself from pushing past Nigel to run toward the sounds of Will’s troubles.

“Nigel, we need to –”

“Shut up,” commanded Nigel, throwing him an impatient glare. He tilted his head back, scenting the air with long draws. Hannibal could have punched him. He couldn’t smell anything aside from his own sour fear and the must of wet earth. What was Nigel looking for? Another groan stopped them short.

Hannibal couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t see past the tall thicket of nepenthes ahead, where he knew Will to be.

“Don’t stop - !” Will cried out.

Pained and so very close.

Hannibal ran.

“Hannibal!” Nigel shouted, scrambling for his swinging shirt. *“Don’t -”*

Hannibal barreled through broad, heavy leaves and ducking under vines threatening to strangle him, ignoring Nigel’s shouts.

His student – his - *Will* - was in danger, and calling for help. Will was moaning, so near to him, moaning something indecipherable and weak.

Bursting through the brush into a dark clearing of heavy shadow, Hannibal met a sight that bowled him over. He skidded to a stop, heels slipping under him, and he fell to his rear, wincing as a rock speared his palm.

But the cut in his palm was ignored.

Nigel’s swearing and crashing through the underbrush behind him was ignored.

His own body’s need for oxygen was ignored.

Everything was ignored for the impossible, fantastical, unbelievable sight before him.

Will Graham, nude, slicked to a shine and wrapped with multitudes of slithering, jerking, wet appendages, was suspended in the air and brought to a wracking orgasm before their eyes.

Mouth wide with uncomprehending horror, Hannibal was immobile, pinned to the earth as Will curled in the tree’s grasp and thrusted weakly into a pale bulb of root at his groin before groaning and falling limp.

In a blur of tan skin and swinging silver, Nigel flew past him, snarling and cursing, to start hacking at the limbs holding Will fast. At the first slash, the tree's appendages jerked as if surprised, as if in pain, and they moved to twist around Will tighter, lifting him higher. The larger, heavier limbs fell to the forest floor and wriggled under the dirt to bury themselves in uncanny escape.

"Hannibal!" Nigel roared.

After wide arcs of the machete, bundles of limp vine and squirming tentacles began to fall and the tree jerkily unraveled like cringing serpents abandoning their prey. Will dropped in a heap on the dirt.

"Hannibal!"

Nigel was bellowing at him, leaping to grab the tentacles twisting above his head and pulling them low so he could slash through the slowest to retreat. Hannibal registered the panic in his voice before coming to realize he was still on his ass in the dirt, frozen and useless.

Will needed his help.

Launching himself forward, Hannibal dove toward Will, scooping him into his arms before scrambling back toward the edge of the clearing.
"What the fuck is that, Nigel?!"

Seeing them safe, Nigel stilled his machete as the tree's limbs slipped into the obscurity of darkness. He came to Hannibal's side, chest heaving and dotted in sticky honey that pinkened his skin. Safe in Hannibal's arms, Will was unconscious, heavy. He fell to his knees, urging Will to wake. To no avail.

"What's wrong with him?"

Shaking his head, Nigel looked up to the tree, now deceptively still, in disbelief. He was panting hard, jaw slack in awe. "That wasn't here last week."

"I don't fucking care! Help me with him!" Hannibal struggled to stand and once he had his bearings, he took off through the brush with Will tight against himself. Nigel scooped up Will's pack and camera to follow.

The field station was closer than Hannibal imagined, as was the manner of all trips home; the journey into the unknown was always the longest. Thighs screaming in protest, he bounded up the station's long staircase, careful of knocking Will's limbs on the aging rails. Once inside, Nigel swept the dining table clear of their things and Will was laid upon it, pale and trailing viscous gel. Hannibal was looking over the red abrasion cuts around his wrists, ankles, thighs and the swollen buds of his nipples when Nigel returned, body wiped clean, with damp towels and nitrile gloves.

"The honey comes off with water." Nigel dropped a low bucket onto a chair, slipping into his own pair of gloves. "And use those unless you want a skin hypersensitivity."

Shaking with fury, Hannibal wouldn't look at him, lest he lose his composure and abandon tending to Will for the excuse to beat his brother bloody. Cleaning Will took little time, and he was rubbed pink and raw as they wipe the last of the honey from under his fingernails and in the furrows of his ears. Hannibal was tilting Will's head back into the bucket of water as Nigel stepped from the table with a heavy sigh. He paced, rubbing powdered fingers over his chin, skin dotted with splotchy red patches, before turning toward his workstation.

Ignoring Nigel's quick scratching over an ink-stained map, Hannibal rinsed Will's hair before retrieving soft flannels from his pack and returning to the dining room to dress him. With his biceps aching, Hannibal brought him to a bunk in the loft above Nigel's workstation.

Then he descended the plywood staircase, looking murderous.

"Answers, now." Hannibal growled, voice low. "What is happening in this forest?"

Looking up over the frame of thin wire glasses, Nigel's scribbles ceased. He sighed, dropping his pen and leaning back in his chair. "He'll be fine. The Devil Tree's honey, like the Liana sap, is harmless –"

"*That was not harmless,"* seethed Hannibal, fighting to keep his voice quiet.

"He will recover just fine, albeit a little more slowly than when he touched the Liana, but he'll be fine in a few hours."

Hannibal could swing a solid fist fast. If he really wanted to. Nigel would be unconscious before he hit the floor and Will probably wouldn't be woken by the noise.

"Just treat him like he's had an overambitious lover and now needs a good nap," said Nigel, shrugging.

The easy tone in his voice would be Hannibal's undoing. "Overambitious lov - what is wrong with you Nigel, what the *hell* is wrong with you? Why didn't you tell us what this place does?"

Biting his lip, Nigel was pensive before his brow smoothed and he dared smile.

"There's someone I want you to meet. Maybe fifteen kilometers from here."

"The fuck I will meet anyone. I'm not leaving Will alone again and as soon as he can manage it, we're going back to the states," spat Hannibal. He gathered his things from the lounge and stalked to the restroom to clean himself of the honey warming his skin.

"I don't mean today," Nigel called after him. "Later, maybe tomorrow, after Will wakes up. He'd probably love meeting her, she's a real kick in the ass."

By nightfall, Will was still unconscious and Hannibal's hair was standing on end from fretful tugging. Leaning against the railing of the loft, Nigel's concern was twisting his lips.

"We should probably visit Alana if he hasn't woken in the morning. She knows plants better than I do and she might have something that helps."

"I'm not leaving him."

With a sigh of defeat, Nigel left to prepare for the evening.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Nigel leads Hannibal toward help while explaining his employer, Alana Bloom. She's...interesting.

Chapter Notes

I was fucking *cackling* when I was looking up these plants. They've helped bring back the writing mojo, along with your beautiful, kind encouragements.

And I know the first one, the Octopus Stinkhorn, is a little creepy but I promise you, this is the nicest picture of a stinkhorn that I could find. Other pictures on the internet proved to be something you wouldn't want anywhere near your genitals.

The second image is a really famous plant in Cambodia, for obvious reasons. Authorities had to tell people to stop picking the flowers because they're endangered. *That* many pervs out there needed their own dick flower. No shame tho, lol. We're all a little pervy.

For Alana, I imagined those two plants bred together to create a mischievous, stupid strong, tentacled hybrid monster.

Hannibal spent a fitful night at Will's side, tilting toward the dusty floor and jerking awake every time Will turned in his sleep. He hadn't woken by the time the morning howler monkeys finished their sonorous calls. They were sharing a tense breakfast when Hannibal finally agreed they should seek help.

Leaving a note on the dining table, Hannibal steeled himself to leave. Will would be fine. They would only be gone for a few hours. As they left the towering field station behind, bounding into the formidable wilderness, he wondered at the queasiness in his stomach.

"Now might be the appropriate time to come clean," Nigel told the path ahead of him, after long minutes of silence.

A soft snort from behind was Hannibal's acknowledgement.

"I haven't reported any of my findings," he started slowly, "because my *partners* and I have been making some money selling the plants we've found all over the world to some – discerning clients."

The soft footsteps behind him stopped, and Nigel turned tentatively.

Hannibal's features were blank, mouth a straight line amongst burgeoning stubble.

Eyes widening, Nigel continued the twisted, sloping path and continued his explanation. Hannibal would catch up, or he wouldn't.

"We've been chasing down mythical plants that we hear about from other travelers, from locals," he snorted, "shit, even from posts on the internet. Me and some others harvest the plants when we can, sell them to Alana and then she ships them to people she has somewhere north of Connecticut."

The possibility that Hannibal could sink a bowie knife into his spine suddenly struck Nigel, and he peeked behind once more. Hannibal was still stalking behind him, hands empty.

"Uh," with a lopsided smile, Nigel turned around again, "she's got some wealthy friends apparently. And she's set up a pretty interesting shop."

-

Atop spongy, sinking earth and dominated by shadowy root systems, Alana Bloom's cottage sat at the edge of a noisy swamp that hosted scores of masterfully camouflaged creatures. She enjoyed the obscurity of her home, tucked deep within the gullet of the Amazon, inaccessible and wild as she herself was. Anyone who wanted to approach had better make real effort, and beware.

As Nigel and Hannibal stepped onto the soggy boards of her porch, the scent of decay and wood rot gave way to an achingly sweet smoke of incense and manure. When they passed under the low doorway of her cottage, Hannibal was transported into a microcosm jungle of its own. Obscured by floating trails of incense, the cottage was heavily perfumed and thick with humidity. Hannibal ducked, startled as a crimson-plumed bird darted past his head to fly into the vine-covered rafters above; joining its brethren as they trilled in greeting and peered down at them with curiosity. Plants crowded every available table, shelf and surface and he couldn't hope to identify them all.

Behind a rugged countertop, fingers spread wide for grip and face twisted in what looked like pain, stood a woman as bewitching as the swamp itself; Alana Bloom. Dark hair tumbled over her shoulders, falling into the fine twist of cloth around her breasts and obscuring pale features.

"Nigel!" Alana exclaimed, balling twitching fists and straightening the curve of her spine. Crimson spots sat high on her cheeks. "I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

"Can't stay away, you know me," Nigel purred with a curling smile.

Alana rolled her eyes and scoffed, shifting from foot to foot as they approached the counter.

Hannibal did his best to look anywhere but at the buds of her nipples pushing against the white cloth wrapped tight around her chest. Some of the plants around them glowed in the dim light of the cottage, covered with glass domes. Others were spiny, deeply colored and enclosed in birdcages and Hannibal decided he didn't want to know why.

"You're looking a bit flushed, Alana," intoned Nigel, "is everything alright?"

She squirmed, biting back a gasp as she kicked at something behind the counter.

"Oh, just fine, thanks," her voice strained. "Who do we have here? Am I finally meeting your brother Hannibal?"

Hannibal smiled, beginning to introduce himself but Alana gasped, eyes wide and blush growing brilliant as she interrupted him. "Sorry give me just a moment."

She ducked, cursing at something and they could hear a heavy scraping over the floor. "Knock it off you little shit – oh!"

As she cried in alarm, Hannibal and Nigel leaned over the counter. Nigel's grin widened, devilish, and Hannibal covered his mouth.

Crouched and swearing, Alana was trying to unwind a bumpy, vermillion vine slithering around her elbow attempting to pull her toward a terra cotta pot under the counter. Slender tendrils rose from the pot, wet and curiously strong. A vine was around her ankle, disappearing under her clothing. Another third vine, smooth and bulbous, flicked apart the folds of skirt at her groin before disappearing under the fabric. She yelped, tugging until it came back shining, dangling trails of slime. Hannibal kept hold over his mouth lest his jaw drop to the floor.

"What do we have here, Alana?" Nigel teased, resting his elbows on the countertop as he settled in for a show.

"Some hybrid – *dammit* - monstrosity that Roberts brought this morning from Birag," grunted Alana, frustrated as the vine sinuated around her arm. "Let me go!"

"I thought you stopped dealing with him?" Nigel looked delighted, eyes following the ooze dripping to the floor.

Alana jerked away from the vine trailing to her elbow, slipping away easily before holding the two writhing appendages in a tight fist. She squeaked as the last vine tugged at her leg, nearly upending her. "The damn thing is so – s-slippery I can barely control it."

She gripped the counter to stand firm, reaching between the parting in her skirt to reveal another tendril flicking at the wet folds between her legs before she yanked it away. It twisted free of her hand and darted back into her skirt, determined to spread and breach her. Hunched over and shivering, Alana slapped a palm on the wood as it rubbed its slick bumps over her most sensitive parts.

"Nigel-" Hannibal started forward but Nigel held a hand to his chest.

"She loves this shit, don't let her fool you," assured Nigel in a stage whisper, "that's why she opened this shop in the first place."

The two vines wriggled from Alana's grip with a fierce jerk; one wrapped around her wrists to pin her to the counter. Yelping in surprise, Alana was bent by the other vine pushing against her spine, whining when the last began an undulation between her knees.

Licking his lips, Nigel cocked his head in mock concern. "Can't get a hold of three simple vines?"

"Shut up," Alana moaned, breath hissing through her teeth, cheek scraping against wood. "I – *fuck* - I don't know what Roberts bred this with but it's so - so slimy – *ah!*"

She was jarred against the counter, panting and breathless while the larger vine behind her unmistakably thrusted in and out of her body. Alana was mewling, feet slipping as she lost purchase on the floor, knees weak with the effort to remain standing. The vine pinning her down slithered forward, tore through the binding of her top and she's lifted straight when it wrapped under her chest and pulled her to standing. Exposed, the vine wrapped its forked end to tug around puckered, pink nipples. Full, toned with triangular tan lines, the creamy mounds of her breasts bounced with each forceful thrust; Hannibal and Nigel were ensnared by the vision before them.

"Glad that Roberts sent it over before it could grow any bigger," noted Nigel. "Looks like a handful."

"*Oh,"* Face screwing tight and throat bared, Alana was panting heavily, biting her lip to white as the vine between her legs moved faster. *"Oh please, yes –"*

Working around her, in her and with her increasingly enthusiastic moans, the vines sped their motions, plucking at her reddening nipples until they bulged under the grip of tight tendrils, and thrusting, writhing and slipping between the folds of her dripping sex until Alana was a taut string of ecstasy ready to snap.

As if just remembering they were there, Alana opened her eyes and threw her visitors a sharp glare. "If you're just here to look at me and tease, then get the hell out. I'm busy."

"We're actually here about a devil tree."

A frown creased the sweat-dotted skin between her eyes. "I don't take those anymore, you - you know that. Mason almost died after we exported the last one. He doesn't want a lawsuit if a client gets hurt."

Finally finding his voice, Hannibal stepped forward, uncertain. "We're not here to sell one. Our companion - well, he-"

Alana laughed between her gasps. "He got his brains fucked out, I bet – *oh, right there*!" She squeezed her knees together; the vine was fighting against the squeeze of soft skin between her thighs. Her entire body shook as an orgasm bore down her. She moaned long and low.

"Fu – fuck – " Alana panted, eyes flying open. "I'm gonna –"

With a tight grunt, Alana came, shaking and shuddering as the vine between her legs pumped and slid over the crux of her slit. She was whining high, growing weak against the hold around her.

"You done?" Nigel purred, grin still in place while Hannibal tugged on his shirt collar uncomfortably.

Alana was panting, attempting to slow her breath and eyes fluttering as a clear trails of slick ran down her thighs. The vines were still entwining around her, slithering up her arms and determinedly thrusting. "Get this thing off me and I'll tell you whatever you want."

Nigel chuckled before rounding the end of the counter to untwist the sticky vine from her arm. Sensing new prey, it began wrapping around his wrist, but Nigel was quick, hands firm as they squeezed the vine in a tight stranglehold. The vine twisted, swinging below his fist but couldn't free itself.

"Hand me that twine." He gestured to a spool of rough hemp sitting on a shelf beside the counter.

Hannibal jumped to clip off a length with a pocketknife as Nigel moved to unwrap the vine from Alana's chest; earning a squeal when the tendril around her nipple was tugged free. Nigel bound the vines together with some effort; they squirmed and wriggled in protest, knobbed red ends darkening to deep purple. With a grunt, Alana pulled the largest vine from herself, soaked in slime and her juices, and pinned it to the counter with a firm hand where it writhed, attempting to free itself as the terra cotta pot thumped against the wood below. She sighed in relief, wiping away sweaty strands of hair from her face.

"Thank you – *fuck*," Alana spit, gesturing for more twine.

She tied all the vines in a strangling knot before shoving the entire plant in a cupboard under the counter. The cabinet shook, rattled and thumped as the plant demanded freedom with indignant blows of its bound arms.

"Give me just a moment." Alana straightened, blowing a breath of relief through the hair over her eyes and disappeared through a beaded curtain behind the counter.

Nose wrinkled, Nigel looked over his slimy hands before wiping them on his pants. "Well, I've never seen anything like that," his tone light.

Hannibal was speechless.

"The young ones aren't normally that strong," Nigel continued, as if that explained everything. "It seems that Roberts is up to some shady shit nowadays."

"What. Was. That." Hannibal said slowly, eyes round with disbelief.

Leaning an elbow on the sticky countertop, Nigel shrugged. "That was a fledgling Stinkhorn, a fungus, mixed with something atrocious. I can't say what."

"Ned Roberts said it was mixed with Callisia Repens but the asshole was obviously lying," Alana said as she stepped through the curtain, wiping her hands on a small towel and peaked nipples still prominent through a small white tee. "I'm gonna feed him to the swamp when I see him next." She leaned against the doorframe, shaking her head. "Is your friend okay?"

Concern furrowed Hannibal's brow; he'd almost forgotten why they had come to visit Alana. "We don't know. He hasn't woken up since yesterday after we cut him out of a - a-"

"Arbor Diavolo," supplied Nigel.

"– that," Hannibal continued. "Nigel said you might be able to help."

"Diavolo isn't a sedative." Alana frowned, tucking the towel under an arm. "It's a stimulant, if nothing else. Has he been taking any antidepressants or antihistamines?"

Distressed, Hannibal took a halting step forward. "He's been taking antihistamines. Is that a bad mix?"

"That might be interacting with the mucous the Diavolo puts out." Alana's mouth twisted in thought. "That just means the antihistamines are doing their job on overdrive, dulling his nervous system until he's unconscious. His body needs to work through the interaction and he'll be fine. Eventually." She shrugged a bronzed shoulder. "I have some crystallized ammonium chloride somewhere. That should wake him up if you're really worried. Just make sure he hydrates."

Hannibal's sigh of relief became a jump of surprise as Nigel slapped a palm on the counter in triumph. "You're an angel, Alana. Don't know where I'd be without you."

"You'd be a broke old pervert," Alana huffed, "but don't go anywhere though. My list of Amazonian suppliers is down to you and Gideon, now that I have to kill Roberts."

If she was joking was yet to be determined.

"Can I make you guys some tea before you go? I have that little bastard -" Alana kicked the cupboard with ire. "- and three death flower sprouts to prep for shipping before Gunner's boat gets here tomorrow."

"I'd love a cup." Nigel stood, stretching with a satisfied groan.

Chewing his lip, Hannibal hesitated to answer. He needed to get back to Will, to tend to him if he had woken during their absence.

“He’ll be fine,” Nigel noted Hannibal’s concern, before flashing a wink toward Alana. “Hanni here has a bit of a crush, you see. Real illicit stuff -”

“Will and I –”

“Hey,” Nigel raised placative hands. “He’s beautiful, I don’t blame –”

“If you think –”

“Let’s get some tea,” interjected Alana, with a tone brooking no argument. She disappeared through the swinging beaded curtain before either man could say anything more. Rounding the counter with a venomous glare to his brother, Hannibal followed without a word.

Alana led them through the doorway into a cozy studio filled with low-burning oil lamps, gauzy curtains and the smoky remnants of slender incense sticks. “Make yourselves comfortable.”

It was difficult for Hannibal to understand her casual demeanor around them; how she could so easily shift through a small ancient refrigerator, pull out a pitcher of dark brown tea and serve them drinks as if she hadn’t just had a knee-shaking orgasm before a stranger and a colleague. Propped on a roughly built loveseat covered in soft blankets, Hannibal accepted his drink with a nebulous smile.

“How do you transport death flowers without killing everyone on an airplane?” Nigel accepted his own drink.

“Very fucking carefully,” Alana laughed, flashing wide teeth. “You can’t seal them airtight, or they’ll wilt before they get to the states. We haven’t figured out how to revive any yet. We can only crate ‘em, seal the cockpit and pray there isn’t a leak on board.”

“The death flowers are real?” Hannibal asked, sipping at a bright bouquet of hibiscus and lemon. He was instantly grateful; the tea was pleasantly chilled and the sweltering heat of Alana’s noisy swamp had drained him more than he realized.

“Yeah,” Alana tutted. “They’ve started growing on Peru’s northern coast. Abel Gideon, another harvester, has been digging them up before they start flowering and producing lethal amounts of toxins.”

“Who buys them?”

Stretched out, feline and comfortable on a sagging sofa, Nigel hummed. “It’s gaining popularity in the wealthy, adventurous crowds.”

“In small doses,” Alana grinned, “it’s smells like your lover after a tumble in bed.”

Her wink bloomed bright pink on Hannibal’s cheeks.

“Even the sprouts can be dangerous,” she added, brows raising toward her hair. “The perfume it emits is soporific. If something spends enough time inside of fully-grown calyx - sorry, petals - they’ll fall asleep and never wake up again. The flower bud will curl and close around them and they’ll suffocate eventually, all while dreaming.”

She trailed off, in thought. “It’s a beautiful way to die, if you think about it. Who doesn’t want to die in their sleep?”

Who indeed, wouldn’t want to die in their sleep? It barely even counts as death, to the dead. Dying in sleep should feel like falling into the longest of dreams, lessening the fathoms between light and dark, unraveling the distance between life and nonexistence.

All three were silent for a while, looking into their glasses of tea and studying the trails of condensation pooling around their fingers.

“Frankly, it’s one of the nicer plants we sell, despite its name.” Alana interrupted the shared reverie. “It’s sole purpose isn’t to kill or eat. Death is an unintentional side effect of the flower resting at night.”

Hannibal looked up from his glass. “What about the tree that attacked Will?”

“True Arbor Diavolo, the Brazilian Devil tree, does actually intend to kill and eat. It’s been spreading through the southern Amazonian forests lately but in western Brazil its earned legendary reputation by killing off scores of farm animals that wander from nearby settlements. Diavolo is particularly clever. Its false roots –”

“*Tentacles,*” quipped Nigel, tilting his drink toward her.

Alana rolled her eyes. “Its false roots would partially burrow in the ground, rolling so they’re covered in dirt resembling upraised roots and then lay in wait until prey comes close so they could pierce them with thorny spurs that would drain its victims’ of blood. Then the Diavolo’s real roots would absorb nutrients through the earth like any other tree. A well-placed tree would profit well from a careless farmer. It took a long time for Brazilian farm workers to figure out that the tree was eating their animals. They would only find piles of feathers and crushed bones and assume some jungle cat ate them.”

“This one didn’t eat Will.”

“Yeah...” Alana's shoulders dropped in a sigh, leaning back in her chair and running a hand through her wild hair. “There’s something going on with Bolivian soil, I don’t know what it is. I’ve been studying it for years. Plants that would normally be carnivorous, are just amorous. They adapt once they put down roots here and oddly enough, they’ve adapted to human sexuality. The Diavolo’s mucous, and many other plants’ mucosae, creates a dermal sensitivity neuritis. The skin over-sensitizes until everything you touch feels amazing. I’m lucky that monster in the cupboard wasn’t bred with one. I’d have probably died.”

-

Nigel promised to start an early dinner as Hannibal quickly went to Will when returned to the field station. He'd turned in his sleep, curling around a pillow and pressing tight to the wall. Waving a small bottle of ammonia salt under his nose, Hannibal tried to wake him; and was enormously relieved when Will's nose wrinkled against the smell. He woke, blinking slow and staring up at Hannibal in confusion.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess," he rasped.

"Do you want to go back to Maryland?" Hannibal's eyes were moving, marking the steadiness of his eyes, the even rise of his chest and the flush of his skin.

"Why?"

"Because of the –" Hannibal blanched, taken aback. "You don't remember?"

"No, what -" Will started, looking suddenly ill. "Did I touch another Liana?"

Struggling to sit forward, Will groaned at the effort and Hannibal jumped to assist him. With a sigh, Will leaned into the support.

"No, you didn't touch another Liana. You came across a different tree that was more…invasive, than the Liana."

Hannibal was very careful with his words, biting the inside of his cheek as he considered Will with concern.

"Invasive?" Will's eyes rounded in shock as he turned to look at Hannibal fully, swallowing around a thickening throat. "Did I get fucked by a tree?"

Eyes darting to the red marks around Will's fine wrists, Hannibal gave a short nod.

Head thrown back in dismay, Will groaned, rubbing his hands over his face. "What the fuck is wrong with the Amazon?"

"I don't really know. I'm sorry Will," said Hannibal. "We freed you before you gained any significant damage, as far as I can tell. Can you drink some water for me?"

Will nodded as he took the proffered flask and sighed after a cooling sip.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Physically, yes." Will glanced away. "I might die from embarrassment though."

"Please don't." Hannibal gave a small laugh. Relief was visible in the set of his shoulders. "Not before we kill Nigel, at least."

Finally looking up, Will's smile was weak, but bright. "Can we kill him tomorrow? I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"Finish this water before you do. For me, please. I'll feel better knowing you're hydrated."

"Can't murder anyone if I'm dehydrated, after all," Will murmured against the lip of the flask.

Hannibal would have rolled his eyes if he wasn't so relieved to see Will lucid and healthy.

"Thank you for looking after me," Will yawned, tossing the flask to his feet and reclining in the cloud of pillows behind him.

"Of course." Hannibal brushed an errant curl from Will's forehead and lifted a blanket to his shoulders. "Nigel is making dinner now, do you want me to wake you when it's ready?"

With a hum, Will drifted into sleep once more.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Our boys are so clever.

Chapter Notes

I tend to mix a little bit of fact with made-up shit, in my stories. If there's anyone here who understands orchid mycorrhizal propagation, please forgive my liberties. This is a shorter chapter.

Low voices carrying from below the loft woke Will the next day and his mood was instantly sour.

He'd been violated by a tree and couldn't remember a thing. It was frightening to think that something so monumental had happened to him and he didn't have even the vaguest memory of it. He shut his eyes, cringing as he thought of the state he must have been in when Nigel and Hannibal found him. He certainly couldn't have been wearing the soft flannel pajamas he was wearing now.

Someone must have dressed him.

Cleaned him probably.

After saving him.

Again.

Rolling to his back and running his fingers through tangled, overgrown locks, Will sighed. How had they found him, when the last thing he remembered was venturing far off the trail, through thicket and vine until he was deep in the underbelly of the trees? He hadn't traveled in the direction they trailed. They couldn't have stumbled upon him on the way back to the field station. There had to be a reason he was found so easily.

There also had to be a reason that Nigel hadn't warned them about the forest. What was it? Nigel certainly wouldn't put his own brother in danger, would he? Was he really so irresponsible? Why hadn't anyone warned them of the dangers in the amazon for that matter? Franklyn, the locals, their hired driver; no one said a thing.

Or did they?

Nigel said he'd had a companion with him when he'd been sent to South America by the University of Alberta. Franklyn had too, he said Nigel came with a woman. Will hadn't seen hide nor hair of anyone else at the station; no duplicate sets of notes, personal belongings, bedding. Where was she?

And why was Nigel so confident in hunting through such a treacherous forest alone, for so long? Also, if he really had study groups come to the field station for research expeditions, where were their provisions or documents? There were only three bunks in the station - where would they sleep?

-

The sun was high in the sky as Nigel and Hannibal examined thin smears of blood through low-powered microscopes.

"Do you see the thin strands attached the microbes?" Hannibal looked up from a round lens.

Nigel hummed in assent as he bent over his sample.

"They look like mycorrhiza." Hannibal frowned. "We use bacterial cultures to germinate domesticated orchids in the seed lab in Georgetown. Mycorrhizal fungi assist in what culminates to invitro fertilization of the seeds and mycelium grows to extend from the fungi's microbes. These strands surrounding the howler monkey's microbes look like mycorrhizal strands."

"Could the strands be from something else? Are there other plants that use fungi to germinate?" Straightening from his microscope, Nigel looked hopeful.

"Lots. But mainly trees. We're not looking for a tree are we?"

Shaking his head, Nigel took a slow breath. "So, we're looking for a giant killer orchid?"

"Maybe." Hannibal was pensive. "Orchids don't grow in direct sun. We'll need to look in caves, shadowy overhangs, hollowed tree trunks, very densely packed vegetation -"

“That’s why I haven’t found it!” Nigel beat a fist on the worktable and grinned bright. “Everywhere that I’ve searched so far has been well lit.” Revelation opened his eyes wide. “There’s a black granite outcropping a few kilometers from here, within the coordinates –”

With a whoop of joy, Nigel slapped his thigh.

“– near a watering hole that’s bound to attract animals – you’re a genius, Hannibal!”

Nigel leaned to grip Hannibal’s cheeks and kissed his forehead with glee. Laughing, Hannibal brushed his hands away before Nigel turned to his notes.

“Good news?” Will asked as he stepped under the loft. He looked between them, hesitant.

“Will –” Hannibal turned in surprise. He quickly stepped from his stool to lift Will’s hair from his brow and examine him closely. “How are you feeling?”

Will was feeling very much like a coddled child as Hannibal searched his eyes for clarity, lifted his sleeves to check for wounds and palmed his forehead for warmth. “Um, I’m good.”

“You look good –” Hannibal cleared his throat. “I mean – you look well. Do you feel well?”

“I’m feeling hungry. Do we have any more bananas?”

Looking over Hannibal’s shoulder toward Nigel’s small smile, Will noted the wrinkled map and tattered notebook in his hands.

“I’m glad you’re doing well, Will. I’m sorry about –”

Will held up a hand, pursing his lips. “We’ll talk about it later, yeah?”

He still didn’t know how he felt about Nigel’s lack of warning and he wouldn’t be able to deal with it until he filled his stomach.

Nigel gave a sharp nod, lips pressed to a thin line. “There’s bananas hanging in the kitchen.”

“Thanks,” nodded Will, turning toward the front of the station.

“I was about to make lunch,” Hannibal called from behind him. “If you can tide yourself over with a banana for a while.”

“Sure.”

-

They were seated around the large dining table, each grateful for Hannibal’s ingenuity with plating Nigel’s provisions.

“How long have you been here, Nigel?” Will asked, eyes fixed to the wood beside his plate.

“What is it, October?” Nigel’s lips twisted in thought. “It’ll be three years in December.”

“That’s a long time for a single study.”

Nigel hummed.

“Have you done much documentation on floral propagation patterns in this region?”

Fixing Will with a sharp look, Nigel was slow to respond. “Yes."

Will looked up from the grooves in the wood, piercing Nigel in place with a predatory gleam in his eye.

“They migrate, don’t they? The plants. The trees.”

The gasp through Hannibal’s lips was quiet.

“Yes.” A whisper.

“That’s why you can’t tell us what to avoid, or where. It’s a crapshoot, walking through the jungle every day. And you’ve been here for so long because the Juy-Juy is particularly elusive.” Will tilted his head, calculating. “Any university study would have run out of funding a long time ago. With so few results and so little information.”

Nigel sat back in his chair, gaze level.

“You’re harvesting and selling the plants you find. Additionally, it’s not study groups that come up here on occasion, is it? You’re exporting them.”

Rubbing along his jaw, Nigel considered Will for a long moment. The uptick in the corners of his mouth told that he was admiring Will’s confidence, his intelligence and the uncanny deduction he’d made from just a few damning clues. A reluctant smile spread Nigel's lips as he laid his hand on the table and broke Will’s gaze. He looked to windows behind Will, sight roaming over lush treetops and seeing nothing but hazy memory.

“I joined an environmental conservation movement in the Sahel region of central Africa, in my younger, idealistic years. We were combating the spread of the Sahara in southern Senegal, a similar cause that you’re doing research for here. After a decade of very little progress, the project lost funding when terrorists took over the central countries and then corrupt politicians pocketed what little we had left.” Nigel looked toward Will again, regret lining the corners of his dark eyes. “Then I met an even more idealistic cryptobotany student in Sierra Leone from the US, following legends she heard from local tribes.”

“Alana?” Hannibal asked, his voice cracking from disuse.

Nigel smiled fondly. “Yeah. She was a force to be reckoned with, let me tell you. Never met anyone as driven as Miss Bloom. I ended up following her all over the world; Asia, the American Southwest, Central America, and now in some forbidding jungle after hearing whispers of particularly fertile soil in Bolivia.

“She likes it here. She spends all her time with the plants she loves so much and the recent – *sexual* developments of the forest give her a new job to tackle every day,” chuckled Nigel. “And we both make a fair amount of money for harvesting plants that she sells to her ex’s brother.”

He shook his head. “Rich people are really fuckin’ weird.”

They lapsed into silence, drawn into memory and thought.

Lip shining under his teeth, Will was blinking at nothing. Breathing slowly.

Hannibal spoke next; low, rumbling deep in his chest. “We’re leaving in the morning, Nigel. I don’t ever want to hear about this place again.”

“No, we’re not,” Will whispered. He looked up at Nigel, eyes sharp and jaw set. “We’re not leaving yet.”

“Will, I think it’s best if –”

“I want in.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

They run an experiment. Also Will is a bit creepy.

Chapter Notes

I decided to add in another chapter because this little snippet popped up in my head and made me laugh. I do a lot of shit just to make myself laugh.

Black Henbane is a fascinating plant. found in warmer climates, and was once widely known as the sacred Plant of Apollo. It has a long history as a 'magical' remedy; known for inducing pupil dilation, loss of muscle control, heart palpitations, hallucinations and delirium (these effects are not found in the story, I just made some shit up for the boys based on...other experiences.) Henbane gives one the sensation of flying, giving to the rise of the archetypal characterization of witches flying on broomsticks. Modern usage found purpose as an ingredient in Scopolamine and Hyoscyamine. Strong stuff. It can kill in high doses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“For the record,” Will said through bared teeth, “I want to say that this is a bad idea.”

“What record?” Hannibal spit, sitting back in his chair with arms crossed over his chest. “Nigel hasn’t reported a single thing.”

Nigel’s crooked grin was brilliant, mischievous as he leaned over the worktable. “This is the closest thing we’ve got that’s similar to the Juy-Juy pollen. Well, according to Franklyn Froideveaux.”

Seated around a messy table piled with sheafs of loose paper, frayed textbooks and numerous ink stains, they each stared at a single vial of clear liquid with various amounts of apprehension.

“That’s not even a pollen – and I *knew* it.” Will squinted, pointing at Nigel. “*I knew he was on something*.”

Shrugging, Nigel snorted a laugh. “Franklyn’s the one who pointed us toward this river basin. He’d been following similar stories of Bolivia’s, um…influences.”

“Franklyn has a Juy-Juy?”

“*Had* a Juy-Juy. Another backpacker harvested one years ago when it was in its vegetative phase. Franklyn bought it when he first arrived. Couldn’t keep it alive though,” said Nigel. He picked up the vial and shook its contents to watch the serum swirl in a thick whirlpool. “So, all you have to do is get a good whiff of this, and you’ll know how to identify a Juy-Juy’s scent when we come across one. Like too sweet chocolate.”

“We know what chocolate smells like,” Hannibal said flatly. “We don’t need to smell it.”

“There’s lots of plants that smell like chocolate in this jungle. You’ll need to smell this particular one so you can tell the difference when you come across a Juy-Juy.”

“And then what?” Will demanded. “We just pass out here at the table and wait to wake up?”

Nigel cocked his head, lifting a shoulder in another shrug.

Jaw angled, Will looked toward Hannibal for rationale.

He received an annoyingly similar shrug.

“What exactly is in that vial?”

“This is a Henbane leaf extract.”

“Henbane,” said dryly. “As in the ‘witches herb’.”

“Said to make one fly,” Nigel replied, waving a hand over the table. “This isn’t a particularly strong concentration. In small doses, Henbane is mildly hallucinogenic and you can fight its effects to have a good time.”

Will turned to Hannibal again, searching for rationale.

“The sooner we do this, the sooner we find the Juy-Juy and go back home,” offered Hannibal.

Will sighed in defeat, looking between the brothers.

He glared at Nigel.

“You’re doing this with us.”

-

Nigel suggested the loft as the best place to relax after inhaling Henbane fumes. Will felt silly and terribly self-conscious as he lay in the bunk beside Hannibal’s, cursing at Nigel in his head. Hannibal came to him, armed with blankets, pillows, and a smile. “Let’s make ourselves comfortable.”

Nodding, Will accepted a pillow and beat it to shape before throwing himself onto it. “This is how I felt before the first time smoking weed in high school. Except I didn’t have a comfy bed to lay in; I was sitting on a log in the woods behind my school with a girl I was trying to impress.”

“How did you feel?” asked Hannibal, amused and easing into his own bunk. Will thought his ease with leaning back to recline on an elbow was way too charming; he needed to look away. It was inappropriate to ogle at a time like this.

“Like I was about to do something very stupid.”

“We’ll be stupid together, then,” chirped Nigel, ascending the stairs with vial in hand.

He sat before them, the sherpa of herbal enlightenment, perched on an afghan spread between their beds.

“All you have to do is hold the vial under your nose, open it, take a deep breath and recork it before you give it back to me,” he said simply. “Then lean back and relax.”

“What should we be expecting?” Hannibal asked. “Nausea, lightheadedness, euphoria, anything like that?”

“Some lightheadedness,” Nigel nodded, "and your body will feel weightless. Colors will be more vibrant, and time will seem like its moving very slowly. It won’t be anything too noticeable.”

“And how long will that last for?”

“An hour, tops. A quick little trip.” Nigel laughed at his own joke as he stretched long legs and leaned against Will’s bed.

Will was unable to appreciate Nigel’s ease.

“Are you ready?”

“I will go first,” Hannibal said, glancing sidelong at Will.

A rush of gratitude warmed Will’s chest.

Extending the vial with proud beam, Nigel winked at his brother as Will sat forward in anticipation.

Hannibal took the vial, looking into its depths as if divining the future. What would come of such an innocent experiment?

He let out a low, steadying breath and uncorked the vial, held it under his nose and his chest expanded, eyes closing as he sampled the Henbane’s perfume. He held his breath for a long moment, recorking and offering it to Nigel’s waiting hand.

His brows twitched together, brief and almost imperceptible, before he loosed his breath and opened his eyes in surprise.

Will exhaled with Hannibal, unaware that he was breathing in time.

“Will?”

Looking between the vial and Nigel’s expectant smile, Will raised a brow. “If this goes poorly, I’m going to punch you.”

In mock despair, Nigel held a hand to his chest. “Why do all the cute ones hate me?”

Will snatched the vial from Nigel with a scowl, uncorked it and inhaled deeply, quickly, before he could change his mind. Instinctively holding his breath as Hannibal had, Will stoppered it and thrust it toward Nigel’s smirk.

Nigel took a dose of his own.

A snort of laughter from the bunk beside him made Will look toward Hannibal. He was supine in bed, head tilted toward the grass thatched ceiling, eyes closed with a foolish smile baring sharp teeth.

“What are you – *oh shit* –”

As Will exhaled to speak, an unexpected rush of euphoria spread his eyes wide. He gasped, shivering as the fine hairs of his arms raised and he was compelled tilting backward into the cradle of his bunk.

Hannibal burst out loud with raspy laughter that startled Will and Nigel both. Will gazed in wonder, in delight as the corners of his mouth lifted. The laughter was infectious; Will didn’t know why he was laughing but soon joined in as the Henbane took effect, muddling his senses and making everything so very funny. His skin felt ticklish, the lumpy pillow under his head was hilarious, the wispy curls framing his ears were the most delicate of feather caresses. Nigel’s foolish slump onto the floor was ridiculous and his following grunt ungainly. Then Will was laughing hard, in tears, at his absurd fear of the henbane, at Nigel’s asinine grin, at the sheer pleasure of seeing Hannibal so pleased.

“Nigel asked me if having sex with you was difficult and I said it was a lot to take in,” Hannibal exclaimed, chuckling with glee as he rolled his tousled head to look at Will.

A stifled giggle from the floorboards indicated Nigel was wrapped in his blanket, curling into himself as the Henbane took effect and he finally succumbed to bliss

Will laughed all the harder. “When I woke up three days ago, my fingers smelled like you.”

They all cried out loud, witless and dumb. It really shouldn’t be funny, Will knew distantly, but it was so very stupid, and he felt so light, as if the weight of all his worries lifted to the skies.

“I ran into a Liana before I was supposed to meet you guys in Talaba,” wheezed Nigel, barely able to catch his breath. “I had to stop myself from fucking an extra curvy tree.”

They roared with laughter, clutching their stomachs and rolling in place. Will’s cheeks were aching and he was chuckling still as he wiped tears of joy from his face. He was warm, tucked into plush cushions and wrapped in his softest pajamas. He wanted to burrow deep into the bed. He pulled a blanket over his shoulders, giggling stupidly all the while, and sighed as satisfied smile lingered on his tingling lips.

“Oh no,” Hannibal warned, slurring as he sat forward and swayed on the spot. “Don’t you fall asleep. We have to stay awake to see this through.” He pointed a wavering finger at Will before his eyes crossed to focus on his fingertip. He brought his hand close to his eyes and gasped, breathy. “My fingerprints are – Nigel! My fingerprints are moving.”

“Oh yeah,” Nigel croaked, still giggling. “There will be some, um, visual hallucinations. It’ll pass.”

Amazed, Will looked to his own curling fingertip whorls and his jaw dropped in delight. He looked to the whirling grain of the floorboards, the waving leaves in the trees outside and looked back at Hannibal twisting a curiously bright blanket in his hands.

“This is what I smelled on Franklyn’s breath at breakfast,” Will said, eyes round. “He’s been micro-dosing on this, hasn’t he?”

“Probably,” Nigel mumbled, spinning his fine hair through his fingers. He yawned, Will could see his toes point and curl as the they poked from beneath the afghan. “I got it from ‘lana and he could have too.” A long stretch and answering groan marked his weariness. “Okay, I’m going to bed now.”

“No, you’re not.” Will started forward and tossed a pillow at Nigel’s head. “You have to stay up with us in case something happens. Right Hannibal?”

He looked over and tutted when he saw Hannibal sprawled across his bed, seemingly unconscious.

“Thanks,” Nigel murmured, snatching the pillow to tuck under his head. “We don’t need to stay up. Nothing is going to happen. We know what the Juy-juy smells like, and –” Another yawn interrupted him. “– and we’ll know how to spot it when we come across one. So goodnight.”

Will saw Nigel’s feet disappear under his blanket as he curled in to sleep. Huffing in disappointment, he looked to Hannibal again. He had rolled to his side, snuffling in his sleep.

“Hannibal,” Will groaned in disappointment. “You’re not going to stay up with me?”

Hannibal mumbled, snoring, and rolled further to balance at the edge of his bunk, knuckles brushing the floor.

“Fucking old men,” grumbled Will. Hannibal was certainly going to fall off his bed. Will stood on wobbly legs, listing as he approached.

“Come on,” he said with a yawn. Will stepped to correct Hannibal from his slump. “You’re going to fall off your bunk, roll over.”

Hannibal grunted, brow furrowed, but remained unmoving. Will pushed at a heavy, rounded shoulder.

“Hannibal, you’re –”

Hannibal groaned, shook his head and wrapped a warm hand around Will’s wrist to tug him into the bunk, rolling onto his back. With a yelp, Will tumbled onto him, loose limbed and unsteady.

“What are you –”

“Sleep,” Hannibal mumbled. He wrapped a solid arm around Will’s neck and tucked him to his chest, humming with pleasure at the warmth of another body. He rubbed his cheek into Will’s curls and sighed, content.

Will held stiff, uncertain if he should slip from Hannibal's grip. Another sigh from above blew errant strands of hair into his eyes. He looked up.

Hannibal was so warm, so solid beneath him and Will’s head spun as his hands smoothed over the firm expanse of chest under his fingers. He blinked, trying to see through the Henbane’s haze and trying to come to terms with Hannibal, Professor Lecter, in his arms and curled around him like a familiar lover. When Hannibal’s deep breaths leveled, Will admitted defeat.

He couldn’t deny his fond grin of pleasure, couldn’t deny the desire to press a kiss to Hannibal’s chin, couldn’t deny the allure of such a man holding him tight. He spread his fingers wide, cupping the mound of curved muscle abroad Hannibal’s chest and huffed a pleased laugh as a nipple pebbled under his thumb. He tilted his chin up, looking toward lax features, looking for any reaction as he rolled the nipple between his fingertips. Will almost jumped as Hannibal took a deep breath and hummed in his sleep.

Will was fighting the Henbane’s effects, distracted and fuzzily aroused, but how could he ignore the opportunity he had? The opportunity to relish holding Hannibal in his arms, the man he had tried to hard to ignore his attraction to for so many years. It couldn’t do any harm to just simply touch, would it?

He only wanted to ghost fingertips over the fantastically soft and firm grooves of his chest, over the tendons of his throat, along the line of his jaw. Will realized his lips were following the trail of his fingers as a soft moan from Hannibal’s throat tickled his nose. He inhaled sharply, stiffened in surprise as he became aware that he had angled himself over him, tucked into the warmth of his neck and sucked reddening marks into his skin without any conscious thought. He’d been kneading the flesh of Hannibal’s thigh, rubbing a wildly stiff cock against his hip and molding himself into his form, completely unaware. Will released him, covering his gasp and jerking back as he searched for signs of waking.

Hannibal’s mouth parted, pink tongue darting to wet soft lips and Will was enraptured by the shine of his spit; his mouth was near glowing in the haze of Henbane rapture. Will pressed his own lips together, tingling and sensitive, and imagined how plush Hannibal’s mouth would feel against his. Would he wake if Will kissed him, just once? They had kissed before, hadn’t they? When he touched the Liana, he had a clouded memory of Hannibal’s mouth moving under his own, but had he savored it? Would he be able to savor it now, with his head woozy and skin oversensitized?

It could be a quick kiss, a simple brush of lips under his own, and Will would be done. He would unwrap from Hannibal’s arms, slink back to bed and ignore the demanding erection in his pajamas as he fell asleep. Just one kiss and he would be satisfied.

Eyes darting up in fear, Will catalogued the roving of eyes under delicate eyelids. He was deep under; he wouldn’t notice.

Chewing on his own lip, Will ran tentative fingers along Hannibal’s cheek. He was so beautiful, elegantly featured and oddly graceful, even in sleep. Will drew his lower lip between his own, sucking, licking and tugging ever so gently to savor the texture and swell of his skin. He had to bite back a moan of relief as he slipped his tongue into Hannibal’s slack mouth and pushed between his teeth to source the flavor of his lips, to brush along the slick muscle of his tongue. His grip in Hannibal’s cheek tightened, and an urge to take, to consume, swelled fiercely within him and he had to stop before he lost himself.

He pulled back, smooth and slow, and lowered his hand to push against a stiff length between his legs, nearly groaning in frustration. His cock was unbearably hard; he eased his loose pants below the swell of his rear, and pushed himself between his thighs and squeezed, rubbing his legs together and hoping it would ease the pressure of his cock. He could just hold himself there, lower to Hannibal’s side once more and savor the heat of another body next his own. He didn’t need to take things any further, the kiss would be enough, he didn’t need to touch or fondle or jerk himself to completion. The Henbane would abate, eventually, and he could slink back to his own bunk and pretend this hadn’t happened.

Will laid on his side, thighs tight together and breath uneven, and looked up once more. Hannibal hadn’t woken, hadn’t moved, hadn’t noticed Will’s discretion at all. His nipple was still stiff, standing to peak the cotton of his shirt, and tempting Will terribly. His cock throbbed between his thighs, precome was flowing from him, slickening his skin and easing the slip of his legs. Will lifted a shaky fingers to twist around his own nipple, biting a lip and wondering if Hannibal’s nipple would be just as sensitive, just as shockingly pleasurable to tweak. Darting his eyes up, Will noted the even, deep breaths of slumber and dared once more.

He parted his lips and licked over the bud of a nipple, flicking it through cotton and breathless fear, before sucking it fully into his mouth with a soft sigh of pleasure. Hannibal jerked under him and Will froze. Then Hannibal hummed, rubbing his cheek into the pillows and laid still once more. Sleeping soundly.

Will couldn’t help himself, he was taken by helpless need and foolish urge, he slipped a hand under Hannibal’s shirt and rubbed over his other nipple, rolling the flesh between his fingers. A soft sound in Hannibal’s throat spurred him further, pinching it once and looking for reaction. He received nothing but a breathy sigh and stillness.

Groaning, quiet and pained, Will removed his pajama pants and released his wet cock from between his thighs. He squeezed himself hard, ushering precome to smear over his fingertips. He slipped his fingers under Hannibal’s shirt and rubbed the slick fluid over and around the

hardened pebble of his nipple. Hannibal licked his lips, loosing a breathy moan and Will moaned in sympathy. He lifted his shirt to rub his aching cock against Hannibal's hip, pressing the spongy tip of himself into soft, supple skin. He rut as firm as he dared, slow and terrible, circling Hannibal's nipple and biting back groans of devious pleasure.

Sliding down the soft trail of hair along Hannibal's stomach, Will dared smooth over the crux of his thighs. He was soft, a fleshy mound of cock and testicles that Will cupped with reverence. His breath hitched as he rubbed his thumb over the end of Hannibal's cock, the bulbous flare of his cockhead was the most delicate of delights. Hips tilted forward once, unconsciously moving to stimulation and Will's lip ached under the pressure of his teeth. He pressed forward against, rolling his body as he looked up in desperation, seeking any amount of waking.

Hannibal remained under the influence of Henbane; though his breath was elevated, his brow creased.

With bold inspiration, Will licked flat over his palm, spit into his fingers and wormed his hand under the elastic of Hannibal's pants. He was delighted, pained and tortured, to discover Hannibal wasn't wearing underwear. With a groan tight in his throat, Will rubbed his saliva into warm flesh, wetting, circling, slickening his genitals and urging him to swell with clumsy fingers. He was urged further with another breathy moan from above.

He suckled on the nipple before him, ever so gently, and thrust smooth into his hip. Hannibal was so warm in his arms, so firm, and Will was panting, moving, trying to stem his moans.

"Will," whispered Hannibal.

Stiffening, freezing in horror, Will looked up.

Hannibal was looking down at him, through eyes barely open, and his brow was creased as if in pain. "Don't stop, please."

Heart pounding, beating harsh against his ribs, Will could do nothing but squeak in response.

Moving slowly, Hannibal smoothed his palm over Will's fist and urged his hand to motion over his cock, now swelling in earnest. "Don't stop."

Turning to his side, Hannibal swayed, eyes unfocused as he lifted his hand to Will's cheek and thrust into his slack grip. He leaned to kiss Will's shining, trembling lips and took his mouth as his own.

Pulling back, Will's eyes were wide. "Ha-"

Hushing him, Hannibal shook his head and drove his tongue between Will's lips, rolled against him and squeezed the hand around his cock. "Keep touching me, you feel so good Will."

He was heavy in Will's palm, engorged with heated blood and he guided Will's slow strokes, hissing as his foreskin slipped and tugged over firm muscle. Thin precome was pooling over Will's thumb, easing the glide of his fist and Hannibal swiped it on a finger that he slipped between their lips. Will gasped, moaned, shuddered as they shared his flavor between tongues and shining teeth. He twisted his wrist quick, earning a groan in response and renewed his efforts with Hannibal's thickened cock.

Hannibal stripped of his clothing, biting at Will's lips to plump red, and pulled Will's shirt from him with loose coordination. They twisted together, nude, overwarm and increasingly desperate as the Henbane tore reason asunder. Hannibal was tensing in his arms, his hips pushing rough against Will's and thin liquid was smeared between them both, sticky and copious.

"Will," panted Hannibal, licking over the shell of Will's ear, "can you – please, I want –"

Clutching their cocks tight together, Will was thrusting, whining high and writhing as their shining, stretched cockheads burst through the top of his fist, again and again. He grit his teeth. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to suck my cock," Hannibal whispered into his hair, "I want to feel you swallow around me and - I want to come in your throat."

Will had to take a slow, shuddering breath before he burst over their stomachs. "Yes – *fuck* - how do you want me?"

"I'm going to fuck your mouth," Hannibal rumbled, squeezing Will's hip tight and thrusting forward with a stifled moan. "Lay on your back."

With a final squeeze to their sticky cocks, Will released them and slid down the bed, pliant and eager. Hannibal gathered strength, clarity and coordination from somewhere, and straddled Will's chest and loomed over him with a long stretch of toned skin and downy hair. He fisted himself, stroking smoothly and he bent to curl fingers into Will's mussed hair. "Tell me if I'm too rough."

Nodding, eager and bright, Will's lips brushed his and he darted a pointed tongue to taste his skin. Then, he simply opened his mouth and looked at Hannibal, expectant.

With a pained groan, Hannibal lifted, and fed himself into Will's mouth.

Lips tightened around the flare of skin, Will's tongue laved over silken flesh and his eyes rolled as bitter precome filled his senses. Hannibal shuddered, jerked above him and Will gripped the globes of his rear with clawed fingers to pull him closer. Hannibal's cock sunk deeper after he rolled his hips; the only nourishment, the only sustenance Will would need ever again, stretching his lips and making him drool. He moaned, sucking the stiff shaft of muscle and heat tight, rolling his tongue under textured veins and whimpering as his cock butted against the entrance to his throat.

The grip in his hair tightened, Hannibal's forearms stiffened and Will's eyes closed as the mushroomed flare of cockhead slipped deeper, deeper with each minute thrust of hips. His lips were numbing, mouth stuffed and fingers twitching as soft pubic hair ground into his face, finally seated in his throat.

"Will." Hannibal was breathy, weak, near unable to speak as his cock throbbed, swelled firmer in a welcoming throat. He jerked back, eyes watering in the effort to stem his orgasm, and hissed in time to Will's desperate panting.

Gulping air and writhing in desperation, Will released Hannibal's rear to stroke himself with saliva hastily spat into his palm. He cursed the thin, squeaking mattress below him, cursed his skin squelching and overloud as he jerked his straining cock in furious need. "Come on."

Burying into the slick warmth of Will's mouth once more, Hannibal curved over him, feeding his fat, heavy cock to welcoming lips. He rolled and pumped over his tongue and fucked into Will's mouth with a smooth, delectable pace. Hannibal was straining, gritting his teeth against the impulse to pound into a hard, fast and delirious orgasm that would spray hot ejaculate into Will's gullet. The tight mouth around the base of him was incredible; slick and warm and so very tempting.

Foamy spit was bunching at the seam of Will's lips, Will's breath was blasting over his groin, bursting through flared nostrils and his eyes spoke volumes, begging, pleading, urging Hannibal to fill him. All Will needed was Hannibal's wide length, pumping into his mouth and robbing him of his senses. He gagged as Hannibal pushed deep once more, throat working around solid muscle that began twitching and pulsing between his teeth.

"Will –" grunted Hannibal, straining and flushed deeply. "I'm going to come – please, can I –"

Nodding, Will could do little else, could barely keep a hold on his own straining cock as Hannibal swelled to velvety marble. The thighs bracketing his chest tightened, dug deep into the mattress and Hannibal's spine curled in a deep bend as he pushed his cockhead to the back of Will's pallete.

Hannibal groaned low, pained.

His cock pulsed, spraying burst after burst of thick seed, coating Will's throat, his tongue, his teeth as he pumped his jerking length in with barely checked abandon. Will's jaw was aching, his lips were bruised, his nose was smashed as Hannibal's groin ground against his face, burying his cock and seed as deeply as he could manage. He was sure his hair would be ripped from his skull as his throat was angled straight and was pumped full of more viscous, gluey come into his mouth, shaking as his hips jerked and thighs quivered.

Will couldn't be more pleased.

He whimpered, vision narrowing to a pinprick of dim light before Hannibal moaned and pulled his twitching length from his lips. Will gasped, coughed, and choked around the thick coating in his throat.

"*Oh fuck,"* breathed Hannibal, he bent to wrap shaking arms around Will and pulled him to sit in his lap. He pressed tingling lips to his forehead and kissed apologies into the sweat of his hairline. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," wheezed Will, panting as he caught his breath. He smiled through watery eyes, delighting at Hannibal's concern and pulled him down to lick into his mouth and share his bitter spend. Will was still so tense, thrumming with overeager lust, and he wrapped around Hannibal to thrust his length into his hip. "That was – fuck, I need – please Hannibal –"

Hannibal wrapped a firm hand around his thigh and rolled them until he was on his back, Will quivering astride his hips. Undulating atop him, Will slid his straining length against the downy, wet hair of Hannibal's stomach and throat working with his need to be touched, to be held, to be brought to his knees in a screaming, soul-rending climax.

They each wrapped a hand around him, fingers squeezing to strangle, to manipulate the firm muscle slipping between their palms. Hannibal gripped Will's rear, blunt nails digging into plushy skin, rocking him forward to encourage his desperate, hastening thrusts. Thin precome was bubbling between their fingers, easing his cock's passage and trailing slime on Hannibal's belly.

"Hannibal –" whispered Will, trying to stem his mewling cries, "please."

Sitting forward with a grunt, Hannibal pulled him closer and mouthed at the long, stretched length of Will's neck as he tilted toward the ceiling. "Are you going to come for me?"

A deft twist of their hands ratcheted his spine stiff, sharp teeth at his shoulder made him hiss and calloused fingers working around the rim of his hole pulled a thin whine from his throat. Pushing back against the tease of intrusion, Will could cry. If Hannibal pushed a little deeper, a little harder, if Will's hips rolled just the right way –

"Fuck, please –" Will whispered, voice pitched and desperate. "I need you to –"

"Tell me what you need." Fingers squeezed firm flesh, teeth bared in fierce hunger as Hannibal drank in Will's desperation, reveling in the man bucking and squirming in his lap. Will was so close, Hannibal only needed to curl his fingers just so, to burrow deep within him, to obliterate all thought.

"Tell me what you need, Will." Hannibal demanded, feral and rough in Will's damp curls. He circled the pads of slender fingers against him as Will's eyes blew wide and his mouth parted in a silent cry.

"Hannibal," trilled Will, shaking and taut. *"Hannibal I need to –"*

"He needs to fucking come, Hannibal. *Fuck,*" Nigel spoke from the floor, exasperated.

Two fingers slipped within Will, tugged sharp against his pulsing hole as he shouted in relief, shouted in fright as his cock burst in their hands and splattered white over their stomachs. Will nearly upended from Hannibal's hips as he pushed them forward and dove to curl against his chest, hiding his face in his neck, shuddering as his orgasm continued barreling through him.

Breathless and in shock, Hannibal lifted his head from the pillows to glower at Nigel.

He was stretched on the afghan still, resting on a cradle of crossed fingers behind his head and looking at Hannibal in disbelief. “You’re a real kinky fucker, you know that?”

Huffing and affronted, Hannibal turned to Will, still jerkily rutting against him, mewling in fear and lingering ecstasy, whimpering pleas against the reality of having been caught. He lifted Will’s crimson face from his neck, fingers soiled and slipping against his cheek, and whispered reassurance against his buzzing lips.

“Did he see –” Will rushed, quiet and desperate. “Was he awake the whole ti-”

“I don’t know.” Hannibal could only be honest in that moment. He pressed a kiss to Will’s shining brow and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. “It will be okay, Will-”

“No it won’t." Will bit out, and with a bolt of fury he sat up, tugging blankets around himself and glaring at Nigel laying below them, infuriatingly relaxed and grinning wide. “You could have gone somewhere else, you know.”

Nigel snorted. “It’s not like I really saw anything, it’s dark in here.”

He was still furious, embarrassed at his unwitting exhibitionism. “You heard enough.”

“Its nothing I’ve not seen or heard before, if you recall.”

“You’re an ass,” Will groaned. He curled to burrow into Hannibal’s arms again. “This is your fault, Nigel. Yours and that fucking Henbane’s.”

With a yawn, Nigel stretched stiff limbs to gather his blanket and stand. The smile he gave Will and Hannibal as he walked to his bunk was fond, teasing. “Henbane isn’t an excitant. It lowers inhibitions.”

Chapter End Notes

Woof.

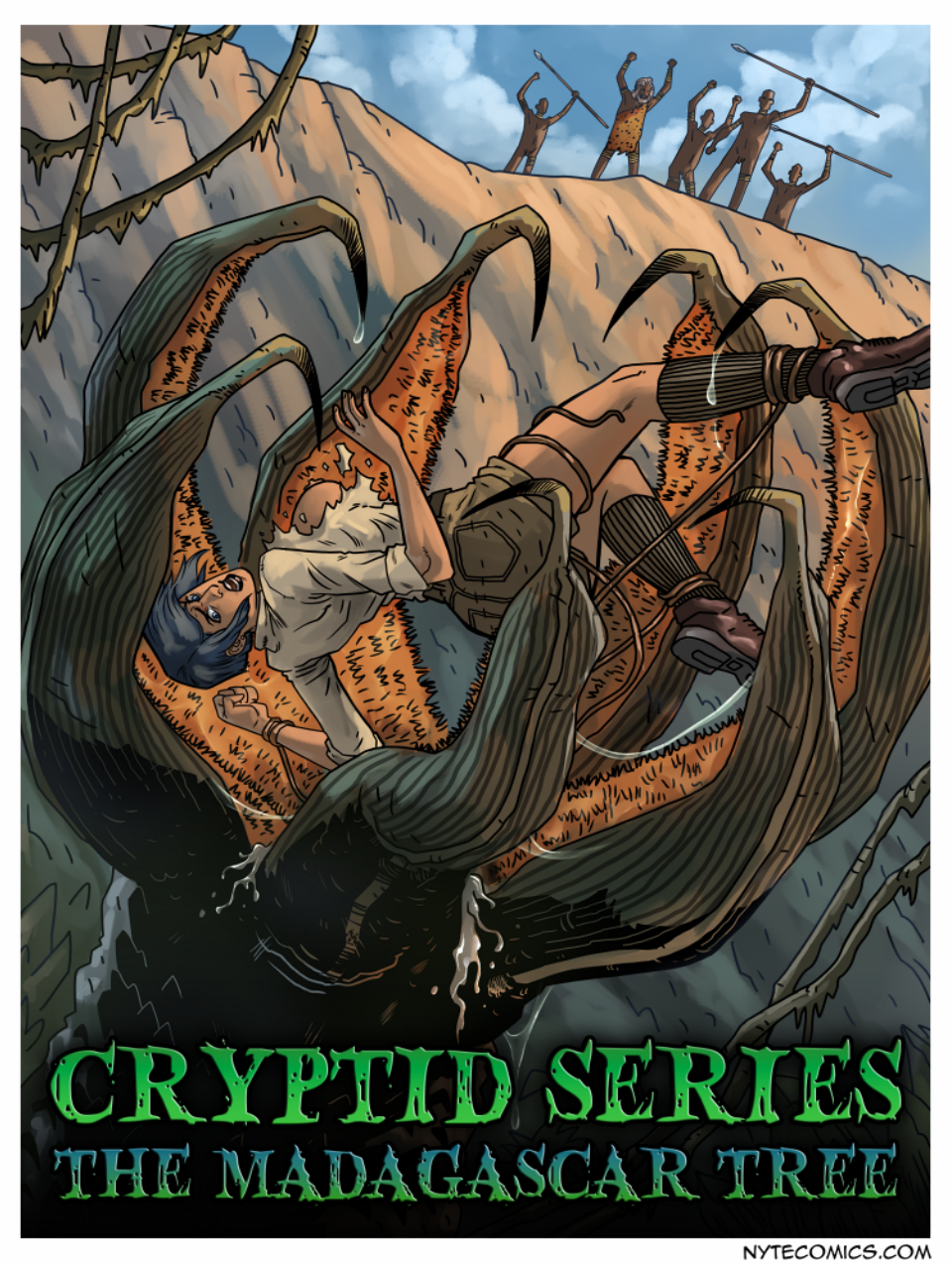
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Our men set off the next day, in search of the Juy-juy.

Chapter Notes

We're gonna pretend this tree, the *Comehombres,* is in Colombia, not Madagascar. For writing reasons.



When Will untangled from Hannibal’s arms and scampered to the shower, the jungle woke with him. Its creatures celebrated the dawn with riotous cries of victory in conquering another dark night. An alarm clock was never needed in the Amazon.

He didn't miss the hissed warning from Hannibal that Nigel was promised a black eye if he teased them over the previous night's events.

They were to search near a watering hole to the east almost two hours away, looking for sleeping animals undisturbed by the morning's calls around them, not yet metabolizing the orchid's spores. Not a sleepy tapir nor unconscious bird was to be found as Will and Hannibal followed Nigel's confident stride.

Trailing the scent of citrusy shampoo and damp, chestnut curls as Will walked ahead of him, after nary of word of their coupling, was killing Hannibal.

"May I ask what spurred your decision to continue assisting Nigel?" he asked. "Have you some sort of plan?"

Will took a long time to answer. He could barely look at Hannibal, couldn't bear to scrutinize the tilt of his mouth. He could only slow his pace until they were side by side and hiking in step up a low incline. "No plan, not really."

He flashed a timid smile at Hannibal's creased brow.

"I'm mostly want to see how his operation works," he added. "It's so clandestine; black market plant trade sounds like the stuff of thriller novels."

Hannibal's brows raised even higher. "It sounds dangerous."

"If I can make a buck off of it, then maybe the danger could be worth it." Will shook his head in dismissal. "School costs money, you know that. And you know I've been struggling."

"Will…"

"If this works," he interrupted, "then maybe I can become another arm of the operation somewhere else in the world. Maybe you can join me. Imagine what we could publish."

"Fame or money is not worth your life."

"Nigel and his coworkers are doing just fine, from what I've heard. And Bolivia seems to be the only place where the plants have become weirdly sexual so it wouldn't make things uncomfortable between us. More uncomfortable, I guess. We can get past what happened last night, right?" Will turned to look at him fully, timid and seeking.

Mouth twisting, Hannibal lost a step and prayed he didn't look too discouraged.

"Maybe we can be their US liaison." Wheels were turning in Will's head. He cupped a hand to his mouth and called ahead. "Hey Nigel!"

Slowing his determined pace, Nigel looked back, head cocked and hair falling over a high cheekbone.

"What plants have you guys found in North America?"

"Eh." Nigel rubbed his chin. "Nothing that can sell, but interesting all the same."

He waited for them beside a scraggly banana tree, hand lifting a frond threatening to poke his ear. "Magnetic Saguaro is what Alana named one. We found them on the southern border of New Mexico. They grew along veins of charged metal like copper or silver and had nearly been eradicated by mining companies by the time we heard of it. The cactus would absorb metal in its vascular tissue. It was beautiful; as the sun set the valleys in Chihuahua would shine like stars. The charged metals would attract passing birds that used the earth's magnetism to navigate and they would impale themselves on its spines. Larger cacti would have pools of blood surrounding them, watering their roots."

Will grimaced, nose wrinkling.

"Why would a plant evolve like that?" Hannibal was fascinated, distracted as he slipped over an exposed root.

Nigel shrugged, wiping sweat from his neck with a handkerchief as he led on.

"That's an entire study right there." Hannibal winked at Will. "If your new career selling plants doesn't work out."

The earth grew soggy as they walked, inundated with a slow spread of ground water. They soon came across a small stream, trickling through mossy stones and wiry brush. Streams led to rivers. Rivers led to springs. Nigel instructed them to head north. After a while, a roaring in the distance drowned their chatter. They were nearly at the black granite waterfall that Nigel suspected would house their quarry.

Water flowed quick at their feet, leading them through dark overhangs of dangling banyans until the tree cover opened and they could see clear.

The waterfall was breathtaking. Beauty seems to make time stop, and a beauty that few see stood tall before them, cascading over steps of shining rock and lush greenery to pool in a large bowl of dark, roiling water. The gods, the spirits, are discovered entirely through creation – the beauty of a sunset, the vastness of space, in the countless stars in the sky. They were found in the powerful roar of the waterfall, misting their upturned faces with the chill of ever-rolling castoff and it took Will very little imagination to see why the Aymara worshipped the earth around them.

They were silent for a long time, marveling at everything around. Will spun in place, delighting at the beauty of it all. Until his eyes landed on Hannibal, who was studying him, rapturous and still. Will blinked, a slow smile widening his cheeks.

"What are you –"

"I think we should leave our packs here," Nigel called from the edge of the pool, hands and face dripping as he rinsed himself of sweat. "We can use this as a base for the day and search the area."

Breaking their gaze, they turned to Nigel; spell broken.

“I’ve been here before, but I think it would be worth our time to get to the top of the shelf and search there,” he instructed, setting down his gear and beginning to unpack. “Any shadowy overhangs of rock, any dense patches of vegetation that the sun doesn’t penetrate, or large trees that have hollowed to allow new microbiomes to sprout.”

Nigel looked up at them after receiving no response. “Hello?”

Startled, Will shook his head, and blinked to clear his eyes. He had forgotten why they had come in the first place. “Sorry, what?”

“We’re leaving our stuff here,” Nigel continued, handing each of them a small hand radio. “Use channel four in you need to.”

“We’re not separating, are we?” Hannibal cleared his throat.

“No, but you never know what could happen,” toned Nigel. “Have pepper spray at the ready in case you poke your head into a dark hole and there’s something grumpy inside.”

Noting Will’s frown, Nigel clapped him on the shoulder. “Anything too dangerous will be sleeping high in the trees. The scary ones hunt at night, remember? And we now know not to touch anything we don’t recognize, don’t we?”

A grimace was Will’s response.

Nigel stood tall, unburdened of the heaviest of his gear, and waited, brimming with excitement as his companions followed suit.

“Lead the way."

-

“It’s called what?” Will asked.

After an hour of reluctantly peering into deep pockets between large granite chunks, of looking into the cavities of fallen logs, of lifting heavy foliage to reveal naught but mud and dead leaves, they were trudging along a wall of broken boulders and steep slope, hoping to chance upon a easily manageable incline toward the top of the waterfall.

“*Comehombres*,” Nigel threw over his shoulder. “The Man Eater.”

Will could only imagine why a tree was given such a moniker.

“It was a huge waste of time. We spent half a year in Bogotá looking for one and when we finally found it, all was left was a broken, burnt stump that our guide refused to even look at.”

“It was that bad?” Hannibal looked up from the heavy fan of a crimson Caladium.

Regret was curling Nigel’s lips. “We spent another six months tracking down two more and found the same thing. They were supposed to be cursed. Any nearby town was abandoned after reports of locals unable to sleep for the howls and screams from the ghosts of their victims at night.”

“Why would anyone live near something so dangerous?”

“How did it kill?”

“That’s the interesting bit. For centuries, the *Muisca* used the *Comehombres* for capital punishment or for sacrifice to the gods. They worshipped the trees. They would offer sacrifices and execute prisoners by dropping them into an opening at the base of the crown and he or she would fall into a long, hollow trunk lined with rows of sharp spikes. The tree trunk would constrict until its victim was impaled and then mashed to a pulp. The gore would rot, soak into the earth and be absorbed later.

"But somewhere along the way, the people started hating the trees. This may have something to do with the Spanish conquest spreading Christianity in the fifteen-hundreds. Ritual sacrifice fell out of fashion, I guess. The trees, along with other old gods, lost their influence. Then became abhorred. And as many ancient stories do, tales of the *Comehombres* became legends. They were thought to be haunted by the spirits of victims past. Neighboring villages started reporting ghosts and unearthly howls coming from the trunk of the trees. So, the people burnt them and moved away.”

To Will’s amusement, Hannibal was looking a little nauseated. He bumped a playful elbow into his ribs as he passed. “Don’t worry Professor Lecter, I’ll keep you safe from all those man-eaters.”

Shaking his head, Hannibal parted a reluctant smile. He turned to busy himself looking under the dank overhang of another granite outcropping as Will led on to pass Nigel. They found the incline they were seeking and after a steep climb of precarious footholds and winded conversation, they crested the hill and found their way back to the river.

The Rio Negro thundered below them into the dark pool seventy long meters down.

Will kept within shouting distance as he continued toward the massive, towering roots of a tree shadowing the entire area. He and Hannibal had passed many of these on their first foray into the jungle. The majestic Sumaumeira, the Amazon’s iconic, towering king. But they hadn’t passed any quite so impressive. He could explore the gullies and crevices of the tree’s roots for the rest of the morning, could get lost in its woody tangles and narrow crevices, could climb to the very tip of its highest arms and peer over the entire width of the Rio Negro basin.

He circled the Sumaumeira, neck angled sharply to peer along tall lines of winding roots and tripping as he ignored his step. A Juy-Juy could hide in any of these crevices, ever-shadowed by cavernous folds of wood. As Will led to the far side of the tree trunk, he stopped, breath catching.

“Hey!”

A crash through the bushes revealed Hannibal stumbling around the tree with wide, amber eyes rounded in fear. “What’s wrong?”

Grinning broad, Will turned to point in the distance.

A low cave entrance was tucked between layered shelves of gray shale, deep and shadowed, lined with vine and lush foliage.

“Perfect Juy-Juy conditions, right?” Will was thrumming with excitement and pride. He might have found it.

With a groan of relief, Hannibal closed his eyes and loosened a tight grip around his pepper spray.

“Did you think I was getting eaten by something?”

“Will,” sighed Hannibal, “you haven’t had the best luck with your discoveries in the jungle so far. Forgive me for worrying, please.”

Will tutted. “Ugh - you’re right. Sorry.”

“What did you find?” Nigel rounded the Sumaumeira, hand radio bouncing against his thigh as he ran. “Oh shit – Will, you’re amazing! I knew we would find something here.”

“This is where an orchid would grow, right? Somewhere cooler, lots of indirect light?”

Nigel rummaged through his pockets before he took to a knee and began writing in a small notebook. “Exactly. As soon as I get this down, we can look for animal markings. If we find none, we can head on in. Give me just a moment.”

He was scribbling quick, mumbling to himself and scratching out rejected notes on various pages as Hannibal and Will approached the cave entrance. It wasn’t particularly tall through the mouth but opened wide and then led into darkness as they looked further. A small drift of wind drew them in closer, lifting Will’s damp curls from his ears.

“Do you smell anything?” he asked. Soft echoes of his voice were muted by damp earth and dripping, mossy walls.

Nostrils flaring with a quick sniff, Hannibal shook his head. “Just dirt and decaying leaves.”

“I can’t smell anything either,” Will agreed. He turned back to Nigel. “It doesn’t smell like anything – no animals, no chocolate. There aren’t any recent animal tracks in the dirt. This stuff is all old. Would it be worth our time to look?”

“Do you see any scat?” Nigel was distracted as he searched his pockets once more.

“Nope.”

“Good.” Standing, Nigel flipped on a small flashlight. “Nothing lives here. We won’t go too far in, in case it travels further than it looks. This will just be a short venture. We’ll came back another day with better gear if we have to.”

Will and Hannibal nodded their assent.

“Shall we?”

Each were hushed, reverent and awed as they pass under the tomblike layers of rock leading them deep into the cave. The air was chilled and damp; such a contrast to the sweltering mugginess of the jungle behind. Will shivered as the earlier breeze returned, coaxing them deeper in the cave. He led the trio, following dim, distant sounds of dripping water and the occasional forward sweep of Nigel’s light.

Rounding a turn past craggy walls, Will gasped.

A massive cavern opened up before him, illuminating a huge, lush, densely topped tree standing below a beam of wide light pouring through a skylight break in the rock above.

“Wow,” was a quiet murmur from behind.

The wind at their backs picked up, funneled to speed by the narrowing passageway they'd followed. The tree’s shaggy moss swayed, loose leaves spiraled free and rose high, drafted through the skylight window. Lush foliage shadowed the tree’s branches and trunk, pierced by thin beams of light.

“This is like a dream,” Will breathed, drawn forward by fantastical whimsy. “I’ve never seen anything like this - what kind of tree is that?”

As he looked over his shoulder, Nigel’s shrug was mirrored by his brother.

He climbed the tree’s low mount, gazing long, lips parted in hushed wonder.

When he stepped under a low hanging of feathery moss, Will was enveloped by a wide, high umbrella of greenery and dappled shadows. He laughed in delight. This made his entire trip into the Amazon worth it. No one else in the world could have stumbled upon this cavern before. They'd discovered a new arbor species, certainly.

He picked his way over twisting roots, careful of his step as he circled the tree. Under the toe of his boot, a trickle of fluorescent purple liquid pooled on the rock.

It was glowing.

“What is that?"

He looked up.

High above him, filling his field of view, was a sight he had never seen before.

“Hannibal –” cried Will, pitched and tight.

“Will? What is it?”

Will could hear quick footsteps upending small pebbles to cascade down the tree’s rocky mound as his companions ran toward his cry of distress.

“Its – its – I don’t know wha-”

An enormous, purple, lumpy bulb of tissue was above him, quaking as masses of unknown objects writhed under its skin and an opening widened in its center as three long stems of – something – of what Will could only assume were long, thick, unforgiving, *fucking tentacles* burst forth and hovered over him.

A fine mist of warm perfume coated him as the tentacles swelled to spray the familiar aroma of sickly-sweet chocolate into air.

“Oh, fu...” Will trailed, deliriously heavy and then suddenly weightless as his shoulders were jerked upward. The tentacles wrapped under his arms, firm and sure, to lift him into the treetop.

For the very first time, Will was beginning to regret joining Hannibal’s expedition.

-

“Will!”

Hannibal burst through low-hanging foliage, scrambling up the slope of shale and twisting roots with violent fear pounding quick in his chest as Nigel slipped over the rocks behind him. Will’s limp form was being lifted into the tree boughs, muddy boots swaying just above his grasp as Hannibal rounded the tree and gasped as sweet chocolate filled his nose.

“Will! Come on, just –” cried Hannibal, shaking a wooziness from his senses. He jumped to desperately claw for Will’s shoes and missed. “Fuck!”

He dug a small canister of pepper spray from his pockets and a strong hand jerked his arm back.

“Don’t hurt it,” growled Nigel. “The repellant is only for animals, that –”

A sharp, solid elbow connected with his jaw, sending Nigel reeling to the ground on his rear.

“Fuck off Nigel.”

Turning back to Will’s plight, Hannibal frantically searched for aim as he readied the repellant. What was he supposed to spray? The plant had no eyes, no visible mouth, only a large writhing bulb of plum-colored flesh that was gathering Will toward a dark tangle of branches. If he accidentally caught Will with the spray, it would be fine, Will could recover from –

A blow to his back sent Hannibal to his knees, winded. A thick arm of something wrapped around his middle, squeezing him tight and expelling his breath as he was jerked upward with a grunt. A blur of purple swung before him as a cloud of warm, misty chocolate cascaded over his face.

“Will…”

-

Wincing as shards of shale embedded into his palm, Nigel sat up from his sprawl, rubbing his jaw. He looked up. Will and Hannibal were both disappearing into the darkness of the treetop.

His head was spinning, eyes clouding. Nigel’s breath left him in a defeated huff. He unclipped the small radio from his hip and depressed a rounded button.

“Alana, if you’re listening…”

Nigel rushed through their coordinates, begging for her aid.

A flexing, sinuous tentacle was descending upon him.

He closed his eyes, sighed, and allowed himself to be lifted into an uncertain fate.

Chapter 9

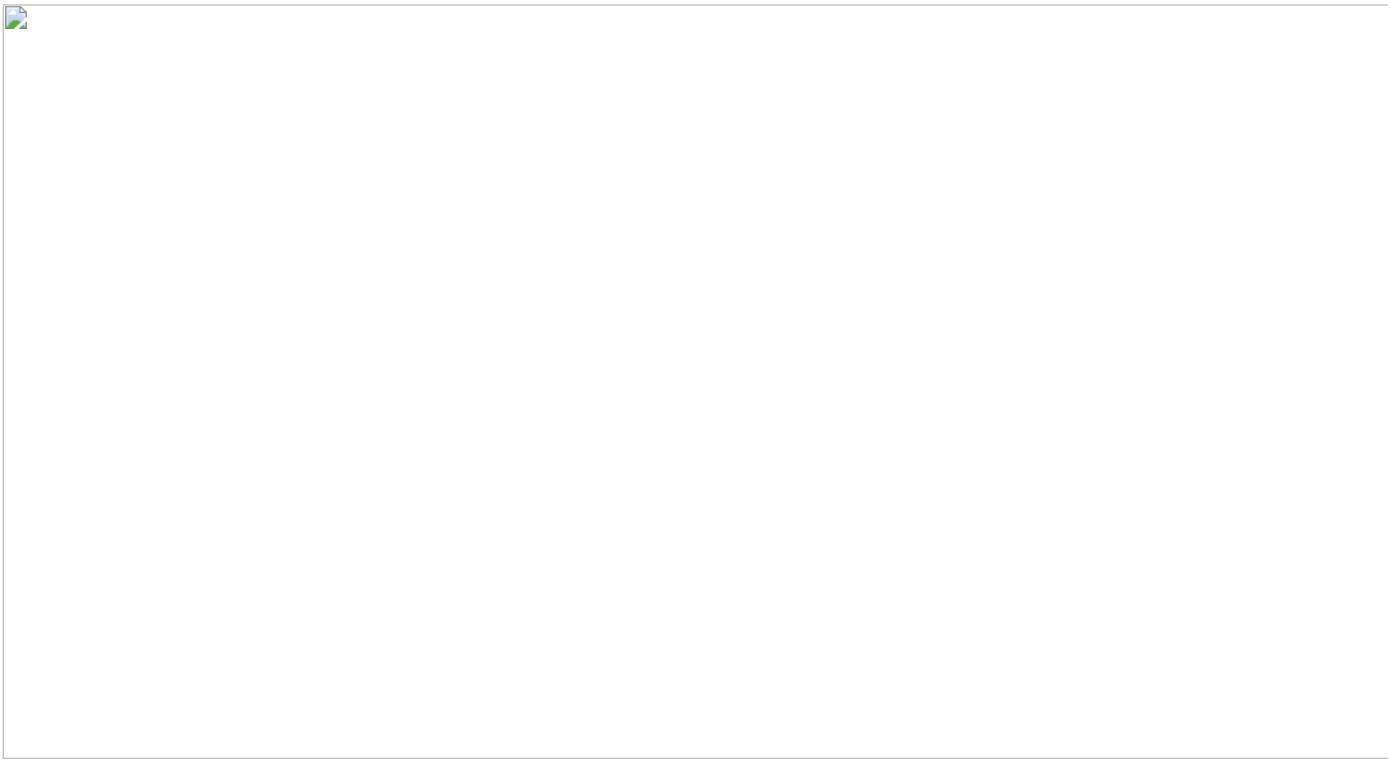
Chapter Summary

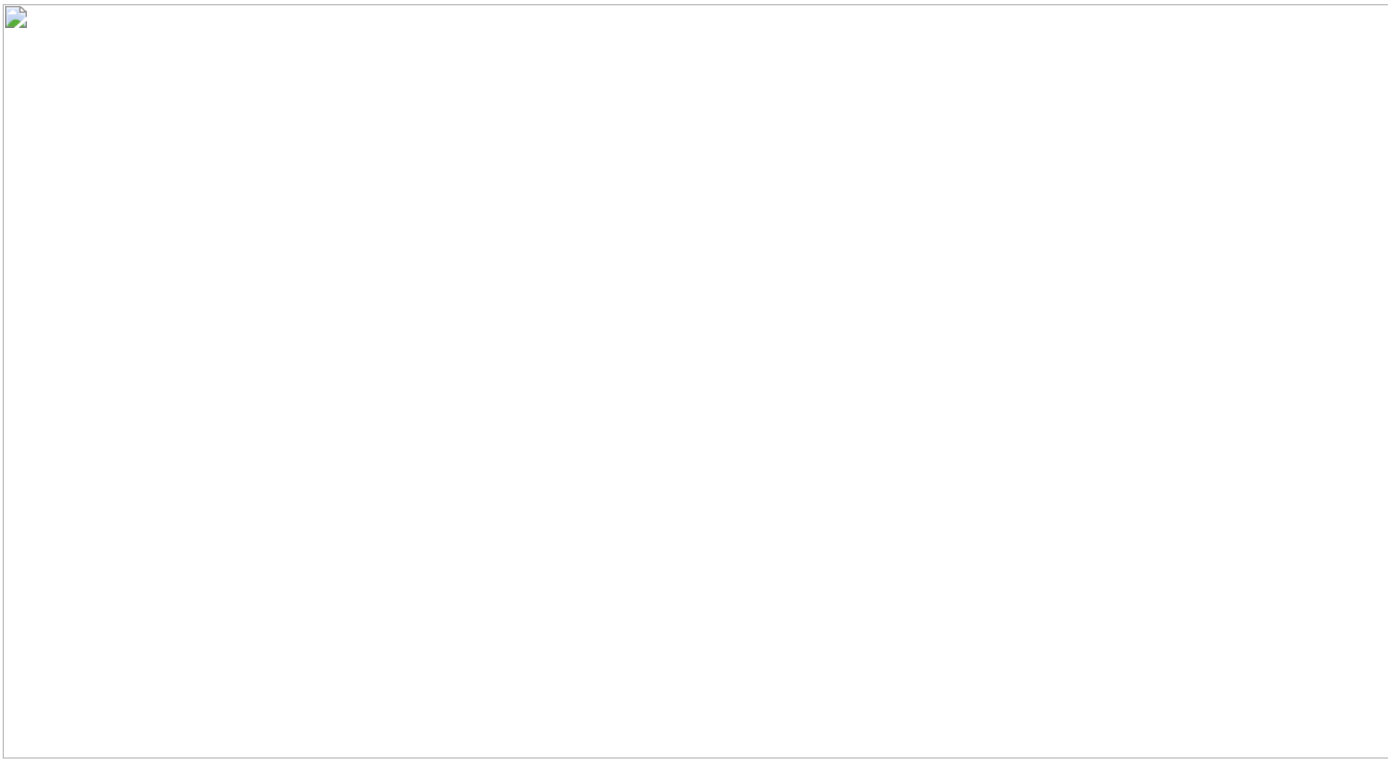
You know what comes next. And then you get a little surprise.

Chapter Notes

What a chapter. I'm pretty happy with how this turned out.

I’m so so delighted to have stumbled upon Brencis Baronia’s alien plant concepts. The first image is what I designed the Juy-juy after, and the second image (in the top right corner,) is how it eats people. They are what I would consider the best depiction (albeit the wrong color) of how I could imagine a Juy-juy. This person is so very talented, please check out their artstation page if you’re into nerding out over fantasy concept art.
https://www.artstation.com/brencisbaronia





Something firm, yet soft was under Will's cheek. Something was tickling his nose. He snorted; face scrunched against what felt like hair threatening to make him sneeze. Rolling his head, he moved to rub his face, but his arm was pinned, snug against his side.

He opened his eyes.

And gasped in horror.

Will was in a dim, deeply purple cavern of smooth, veined tissue with Hannibal and Nigel pinned against his shoulders, facing him. They were centered around the stem of what could only be the Juy-juy's reproductive pistils, having been lifted into the bulb their lower bodies protruded from. Their legs and hips dangled from the bulb's sphincter, too large to be swallowed completely. He had been resting his cheek on Nigel's shoulder. A dark spot of drool was spreading through cotton.

Hannibal's face was upturned, head leaned back against the bulb's fleshy walls and snoring. Trying to speak but receiving nothing by a raspy grunt, Will cleared his throat. At the noise, Hannibal jerked forward with a start.

"Wha-" groaned Hannibal. "Where are we?"

Squinting, Hannibal made the same discovery as Will had; he was unable to lift his arms, unable to wipe the fog of unconsciousness from his eyes. His brow furrowed, then lifted in realization.

"Will," he whispered, eyes widening. "Are we inside of the Juy-Juy?"

Will could only nod.

Hannibal looked around, horror writ on his features, before focusing on the stem between them and warily eyeing bulging, florescent nodules attached to it providing dim light. "Is that – *Nigel wake up."*

With a groan, Nigel's head rolled to the side, and he refused to wake.

"Nigel, dammit, wake up right now."

"Fuck Hanni, give a man –" His shoulders shifted, jerked, and his dark eyes sprung wide. "*What the fuck?* Why can't I –"

Stiffening, Nigel grunted as he failed to loosen from the hold around his waist. He swung a leg with effort and only managed to kick Will's shin.

"Stop it –" Will hissed, throwing a glare toward Nigel's nose. They were all far too close to one another. "Why aren't we still unconscious?"

"Has the pollen worn off?" Hannibal asked, head swiveling as he looked around their confinements.

"I think the pollen comes from the end of the tentacles," said Nigel. He was frowning, lips curled as he attempted to plan an escape. "The tentacles led from the roots outside, not from the ovary."

“That’s what we’re inside of, isn’t it?” Groaning, Will tilted his head back until it bounced off the fleshy wall behind him. “A giant fucking flower ovary. And this stem between our faces leads to the pistils?”

“One is wrapped around my leg, I think,” said Hannibal.

In experiment, Will flexed a knee. “That’s my leg.”

“How long have we been here?”

They look toward each other before directing the question toward Nigel. He shrugged as much as he could with his arms held fast. “I radioed Alana. Hopefully she got the message. It could be a few hours before she comes.”

Jaw angled, Will glared. The best way he could think to express his ire would be to spit on Nigel. Maybe that would make him feel better. “So what, we just wait here until she *maybe* rescues us, or until we get digested?”

Eyes still roaming the dark walls of the bulb, Hannibal cocked his head. “I don’t feel or see any digestive fluid, do you?”

They fell into silence as they surveyed their surroundings, categorizing the sensations of their bodies.

“I thought it was supposed to crush people to death.” Hannibal was frowning.

Grimacing, Nigel’s response was halting. “From the looks of it, we may have – mistranslated what the *Aymara* told us."

Will’s teeth squeaked together as he tightened his jaw.

“They did say *abrazo*, which means hug. We guessed it to imply ‘crush.’ To death.”

“We’re going to be hugged to death,” Hannibal stated, dry.

Shaking his head, Will inhaled deep, slowing his anger. “How the hell can we trust anything you’ve told us about the Juy-Juy, at this rate?”

“It absolutely smells like chocolate,” Nigel defended. “It’s also proved to be a sedative, if you remember.”

“And overgrown vines did collect us,” added Hannibal.

“Tentacles.”

“Oh fuck you, Nigel.” Fresh heat bloomed across Will’s cheeks as his ire grew. “And fuck your damned tentacles. When we get out of here –”

He jerked forward with a gasp, and froze. Blue eyes darted sidelong toward Hannibal.

“Was that your hand?”

Hannibal shook his head.

Color was draining from Will’s face as he looked to Nigel.

He shook his head as well.

“Something –” Will wriggled, throat tightening in fear. Something had brushed over his knee, a mere caress, before disappearing into anonymity. Will took a slow, shuddering breath as he tried to calm his nerves. “Something touched me."

They were all still, straining to hear movement outside of the bulb. Anything that could be happening was muted, their senses robbed by the thick lining of fleshy tissue. Will felt as if his skin were a live-wire, ready to spark and combust with the smallest of charge. Any slight touch, any inexplicable movement, would be his undoing.

“Well, we can probably say with confidence that it was a tentacle,” Nigel started, keeping a level tone. “Maybe it was just settling in –”

Then Nigel jumped, placating assurances cut short. He shivered, eyes blinking rapidly as he breathed low to calm himself.

“Nigel.” Wills voice was flat, teeth gritted. “Did something touch you?”

Nigel’s throat bobbed. He took a deep breath and finally met Will’s gaze. “There is something in my pant leg,” he said simply. “And its moving toward my –”

His body was tugged, sharp and quick, as the ovary around them squeezed to rob their breath. It relaxed, to their shared relief, before everything was still once more.

“Nigel.”

“What just –”

“Relax.” Nigel kept himself composed. He heaved a heavy sigh, trying to straighten his shoulders in his best semblance of dignity. “My pants are gone.”

The din of Will and Hannibal’s frenzied shouts rang loudly.

Hannibal was writhing against them, voice hoarse as he roared his overwhelming panic, demanding the flower release them, shaking his head to and fro as he tried to slip from its hold. Will was kicking at the underside of the bulb, landing heavy blows against the dangling pistils between their knees, mistakenly catching Hannibal and Nigel's legs both and rolling himself ineffectually against the grip around his waist. His cursing was venomous, infuriated and quite colorful, matching the brilliant hue of his cheeks.

"Listen -"

"- better get us out of here, Nigel, or –"

"– your ass from a hole in the groun–"

"Calm down, and -"

"– to think of a way to –"

"– stupid, cock-sucking fuckwad –"

"Good grief, Will."

"– now, Nigel! You need –"

"Stop!" Nigel shouted; face flushed.

Fuming, breathing heavily and uncomfortably disheveled, Will and Hannibal stilled their tirade. Nigel told them his radio was probably still attached to his pants and if one of them could slip from the ovary, they would be able to contact Alana in the few moments they had before the Juy-Juy dosed them again. It would be enough time. She would come, she always did. She would know how to get them out.

When identical pairs of honeyed eyes landed on him, Will balked. He looked between them, understanding why he was the likely hero of the moment. He was the smallest, the thinnest, would likely be the wiliest to move quickly before the Juy-Juy could capture him again.

Will thought that Nigel put an awful amount of trust in someone who would rather feed him to the *Comehombres*.

He rolled his eyes, giving an experimental wriggle in place and then glared at a snort from Nigel.

"Can you move your arms at all?" Hannibal asked gently, taking his attention.

Sighing, Will rolled his shoulders and pushed outward with his elbows. The smooth sphincter around him gave a little before it tightened in sharp response. They were all pressed tighter together and Nigel's answering wheeze was a victory for Will. He smirked, before attempting to angle his elbows again. With a great heave, Will widened his arms, gaining an inch of space before the bulb around them pulsed to tighten further. A raspy cough bursting past Hannibal's lips stayed his motions.

"This isn't working," Will hissed with frustration. "I'm going to suffocate us all."

He swung a foot, hoping to catch the toe of his boot on one of the pistils between them. His kick connected with something solid as a gasp from beside him widened his eyes.

"Did I get you? I'm sorry, I –"

"I'm fine Will, please hurry and try to –" Hannibal squirmed and a sudden jerk closed his teeth around the tip of his tongue.

"What was that?"

Blinking fast, Hannibal shook shaggy locks of hair around his head.

"Did –"

"Please Will, we need you to -" groaned Hannibal, his eyes tightened with discomfort.

"Hannibal." Nigel interrupted, blunt. "I can feel your knees."

Throwing Nigel an irritated glance, Will growled. "We can all feel each other's legs, we're pinned together in-"

"Hannibal doesn't have pants on either."

Will bit his tongue as well. He really needed to move.

He began undulating, twisting and jerking as much as he could manage. A slithering length began twisting around his ankle and he yelled in surprise. His hands were scrabbling at his sides, desperately attempting to grip whatever material he could hold on to, nails tearing to the quick. The grip around his waist was pulsing, loosening before tightening and robbing him of breath as frightened adrenaline made him thrash in place. With a ferocious jerk forward, Will's forehead slammed into the stem before him, and the folded skin of his furrowed brow smashed into a shining, lumpy nodule.

The nodule burst, spilling a thin, lilac-colored liquid across his brow, over his nose, into his eyelashes.

He gasped, jerking backward in surprise, and then sneezed.

A fine spray of pale liquid coated Hannibal and Nigel's shocked expressions. Mouth agape, Will looked between them, unsure if he should laugh.

The instinct to lick his lips was undeniable; the liquid was finely sweet, tasting sharply of cacao. He recognized another nectar.

A shiver ran through him, disconcertingly at odds with a familiar heat spreading through each vein, each artery. "I think –"

Sweat bloomed along his hairline, his vision brightened, the fine details of Nigel and Hannibal's faces were softening to a creamy glow and saliva pooled slick under his tongue. He licked along suddenly parched lips and nearly moaned as they tingled under his teeth.

Looking around him, Nigel and Hannibal were clearly beginning to feel the effects of insidious, virulent nectar. Hannibal's eyes were screwed shut, fighting the indomitable heat thundering through his bloodstream. Nigel inhaled deep, tilting his head back and stifling a giggle. Will looked at him with the wonder of new discovery.

How had he ever been mad at Nigel? How could he be upset with someone so beautiful, so powerfully youthful, with such a fine curve of taut flesh stretched under his chin? The rakish grin spreading across his face was alluring; Will wanted to lick his smile, to taste the joy across his face, to find out what kind of moans he could coax from his tongue.

"Nigel," Will whispered.

Head rolling on his shoulder, Nigel tilted a devilish grin toward him. "Yes, gorgeous?"

A snort drew their gazes. Hannibal was resting his forehead on the Juy-Juy stem, smiling at nothing, eyes still closed tight.

Nigel nudged him with a knee. "What are you laughing at?"

"This is just like the Liana sap," Hannibal slurred. "But less intense, somehow." He lifted his heavy head to beam at them both. "I love you guys."

"This is a weird way to –"

Wil gasped, mouth round.

Something was tugging at the back of his pants. He foolishly craned to look behind himself and then laughed as he realized they were still stuck, still half-swallowed by an unbelievably large plant with their legs dangling from its sphincter. His waistband was tugged sharply, and he yelped as the seat of his pants were torn by a vicious jerk from below. His knees knocked against his companions', boots twisting around his feet as the plant struggled to free him of his clothing.

Another something, something that could only be a *godforsaken tentacle*, ran up his thigh and raised goosebumps in its wake. A stirring in his groin made him quake.

"I think –" he mumbled, tongue heavy. "Fuck I need –"

"Will look at me."

He looked up at the surety in Hannibal's voice. Hannibal's eyes were unfocused, words thick as he blinked hard to clear his vision. "We are right here with you, and we'll figure out –"

A groan burst from him. He shivered hard, curved lip stretched white under sharp teeth. Hannibal rolled his hips below the bulb, rubbing a swelling length against the pistils between them and panting in relief. Will wanted to touch him so badly. He twisted his arms, his wrists in the effort to hold his hand, to entwine anything possible.

He could barely move, only succeeded in slipping his arm forward to pin awkwardly against his chest. He was sweating more heavily now, they all were, and their faces were shining, reddening as they panted identical, unsatiated need. Will knew the brothers would be just as hard as he was, blunted tips of dusky cockheads brushing against the stem between them all, denying the relief of firm hands and slick mouths were they needed it most.

"Will," hummed Nigel.

Will looked to him and as soon as his chin tilted upward, Nigel swallowed his gasp of surprise in a bruising kiss. He had forgotten how close their faces were. He moaned against him, licking deep, stretching as close as he could manage. Nigel nibbled his plumped, sensitive lips, sampled the sweat along his chin and purred promises of ecstasy into his ear. A whine turned Will's head.

Hannibal was watching them, rapt and tortured, still writhing in place.

"You poor thing," Will sighed. He turned to Hannibal and stretched as far as he could. Hannibal was further away; their lips could barely brush and a grunt of frustration burst through Hannibal's teeth. He struggled harder, tendons and veins standing in relief above shining collarbones as he jerked against the Juy-Juy's hold. His fine hair was plastered to his forehead, eyes bright with need and he was rumbling frustrated growls deep in his chest.

"Will I need you", he panted.

Will could only look on, could only groan in sympathy as Hannibal jerked closer, skin slipping against the flower as sweat slickened his skin.

"Will please," Nigel called and Will's head was swiveling, torn between the promise of sweet kisses and the plight of the man he ached for. Hannibal surged forward with a beastly roar that made him jump. Hannibal slipped, just barely an inch, below the Juy-Juy's sphincter.

"Hannibal –"

Insensate, Hannibal jerked toward him again and slipped further down.

“Hannibal you’re –” cried Will, breath quickening.

With a snarl, Hannibal strained, teeth gritted, shoulders wrenching, twisting and fighting until his slick skin slipped in the hold around him. Surprise opened his eyes wide before he dropped from sight.

“*Hannib-”*

Something warm and heavy wrapped around Will’s waist, Hannibal’s flailing arms, and he was tugged down from the flower’s sphincter with a yelp.

They fell.

They didn’t fall far, landing on the firm cushy curve of smooth petals.

The heavy, outer layer of corolla, of sturdy petals, curled beneath them, folded together forming a cradle of velvety bedding. Will and Hannibal tumbled down together, landing in a heap of sweaty limbs and discarded trousers. Will looked around, stunned. They were encased in the protective shell of a massive flower, seemingly closed against the chill of night.

He turned to Hannibal in shock. Hannibal was looking up, toward blunt pistils nudging against Nigel’s flailing legs and stiff, bouncing cock. Muffled shouts could barely be heard, high above. Will clapped a hand over his mouth; a burst of air pushed past his fingers.

Then a smooth hand tilted Will’s chin down.

Hannibal was bearing down on him, intense and focused, before their mouths collided with kiss that made his heart soar. He was pushed, pliant and willing, onto their soft bed of smooth petals, onto the rumpled pile of torn clothing, as Hannibal descended between his thighs. He rubbed his bobbing, dripping length against Will’s own and Will arched up, hissing with pleasure as they ground tight, moved together. He rolled his hips, tangling his hands in mussed hair and moaning into his mouth.

“Will.” Hannibal bit along his jaw, licked over the shell of his ear. “Fuck you feel so good, Will.”

They tore from their clothes until their bodies were sliding, slipping against one another as the Juy-Juy nectar heated them to conflagration. Will was burning, his core an inferno of consuming need and if he didn’t come in that very instant, he may combust.

Slipping a hand between then, Will wrapped around their nudging cocks and groaned as he squeezed the ache from himself. With a grunt, Hannibal stiffened, teeth buried sharp in his lip. He shuddered, pulsed and burst sticky streams of come over Will’s stomach, moaning all the while. He rut into the fleshy tunnel of Will's hand, hissing at the tight squeeze of his fingers and the nerve-wracking ecstasy thundering through him. Will tangled a grip into his hair, wrenched him to his lips and drove a demanding tongue between Hannibal’s teeth, suckling and coaxing sighs of relief from him.

Will rolled them, swiped Hannibal’s spend from his stomach and coated himself, stroking tight and grinning feral as he hovered above. Teeth bared and bright eyes sharp, he shoved Hannibal’s shaking thighs to his chest.

“I’m going to fuck you Hannibal”, he panted, gaze fixed on the furl of pink flesh exposed below him. He rubbed oversensitized, throbbing heat between Hannibal’s spread cheeks, near growling in delight as he notched himself at the breach of his body.

“Do it."

Hannibal stretched to wrap long legs around Will’s waist and pulled him in fast, until his spine ratcheted tight against the intrusion of an unyielding, rigid length. Breath was punched from him, he grunted loud, pained and another shiver ran through him.

“Shit I’m –”

A bellow from above widened Hannibal’s eyes and Will had barely a chance to look over his shoulder to see a growing mass of tan flesh and cartwheeling limbs barreling toward them before Hannibal jerked him aside, rolling to tuck Will under himself.

Nigel landed on the very spot they had just escaped, flat on his back and groaning as he curled to his side.

“Are you okay?” Will choked. He had completely forgotten about Nigel.

“*You fucking cunts*,” Nigel moaned, face screwed in agony. “You just left me there.”

“I –” Will stuttered. He looked up to Hannibal still kneeling above him.

His mouth was working, soundless, eyes blinking and dumbfounded with surprise. Hannibal cleared his throat, chest still heaving from his exertions. “Are you alright Nigel?”

“No, I’m not alright, you asshole.” Nigel picked himself up gingerly, until he could sit straight and glare. “You left me up there, dick hard as rock, to get fondled by who knows what, until I could sweat myself free and fall flat on my ass. While you guys were down here going at it like fucking was going out of style. Again.”

Will shivered, reminded of the heat blasting through him, of his stiff length straining between Hannibal’s thighs and he gripped himself to relieve the pressure. “Fuck I don’t know what to –”

“Hush,” Hannibal soothed. He lifted to angle himself over Will and sunk down, spine stiffening. He shuddered, looking back toward his brother. “Go sit in a corner and – oh –” He gasped as Will steered his hips to roll fast, urgent. “What - Will, wait a –”

The sweet flower’s nectar was clouding Will’s senses once more. His hands scrambled to squeeze, to caress, to grab anything he could reach.

“Hannibal come on, I need you now,” he panted, fingers clawed and raising lines of crimson.

Nigel grimaced at his own neglected, dripping cock resting against his thigh. He sighed, rolling over to attend to himself.

“Get the fuck over here, you prick,” Will growled. When Nigel turned back, Will’s frosty eyes were piercing him with a sharp glare. “Put your dick in my mouth and don’t say a fucking word.”

Nigel hesitated, shaken. He looked toward his brother.

Hannibal was shaking in his own right, as he rolled and writhed upon a thick cock spearing him so deliciously wide. He nodded toward Will’s invitation, toward his shining lips and pinkened tongue on display, before turning back to his own pleasure.

Will would be theirs to share.

Nigel’s cock was heavier than Will expected, swollen rigid and salty with smoky musk as it brushed over his teeth and butted against his tongue. When he wrapped his lips tight, licked over fleshy muscle and sucked hard, Nigel groaned. A plea of mercy caught in his throat and he barely caught himself before remembering Will’s command. Nigel could go hoarse praising the slick mouth around him.

Will was in perfect bliss as his eyes closed, his breath hummed.

The tight, smooth grip of Hannibal sliding up and down his cock was incredible as to be unreal, the weighty girth stretching his lips and bruising his throat was satisfying a deeply buried, primal craving he hadn’t known he kept. He squeezed a cruel grip around the base of Nigel’s cock, pumping him and urging him faster.

“Will,” Hannibal groaned. His brother’s lean muscle bunching and curving into Will’s lips was a sight that struck him soundly, urging his hips faster and compelling a firm hand to wrap around himself. He would come again, from the sight before him alone.

Gasping for air, Will twisted to lick, lave and suckle over Nigel’s straining length. He gathered what foreskin he could manage between his lips, ran a pointed tongue within the hollow of wrinkled skin and grinned as a pained cry of delight sounded above him. When Hannibal sped his motions, Will’s groin tightened and his stomach flexed slim grooves of muscle.

“Hann–” he panted, “Hannibal I’m going to come.”

Hand roving fast, jerking and twisting himself to an ever-quickening orgasm, Hannibal hissed as Will stiffened to marble within him. When he angled just so, rolled in such a way, the spongy head of Will’s cockhead brushed past the bundle of nerves that tightened his throat and ran his breath ragged.

“Come for me,” Hannibal gritted between clenched teeth. “Fucking come, I want to feel you."

Hips jerking erratic, Will’s orgasm bore down on him with fury. His knees stiffened, spine curved and heels dug into the satiny petals supporting them. He pulled Nigel’s hips tight to his face, rolling his head and wedging the mushroomed flare of his cock into his throat as he moaned low. Will’s head was spinning, it felt like the floor beneath them was quaking, he was going to lose his mind if –

Will’s cock swelled, jerked and erupted to spray volleys of thick seed within the tight squeeze of Hannibal’s slick, pulsing hole. He was shaking between them, hips rolling, mouth slack around the turgid length slipping over his tongue. He was dimly aware of a splattering of warm liquid over his stomach, dimly aware of Nigel pulling back to speed blurring knuckles over his face. When salty spend striped across his lips, Will opened his mouth wide, lapped over the fleshy muscle above him, ignorant of the groaning curses spilling from Nigel’s lips.

He grunted as he slipped from Hannibal’s soft, dripping entrance, reaching to feel any part of him as Hannibal collapsed at his side, heart thundering in his chest.

Nigel fell back to sit on his heels, panting, in shock. He ran both hands through his hair, cheeks puffed out as he exhaled long. “So that was –”

“Nope.” Will came to his senses quickly, angling his chin up to glower at Nigel, upside down. “Not a word.”

He glanced toward Hannibal’s fond smile, heart swelling as he entwined their damp fingers. “I think I –”

Will froze, features flattening. “Do you smell that?”

Hannibal’s brows came together. He sat up, nose lifted to the air. Head cocked, he turned back to Will, He laid a hand to the Juy-Juy’s petals cradle.

Thin drafts of smoke scented the air and Will sat up quickly.

“What's-”

The Juy-Juy was quaking.

"Hannibal, what's -”

With a cascading, jerking, spinning rush of rumbling, the cradle of petals opened up below them and they fell, frozen in disbelief.

Time moved slow; and Will looked on in horror.

Shock was paling Hannibal's face, Nigel's hands were tugging at his shoulders and the blunt, swollen bulb of the Juy-Juy's ovary and pistil was shrinking curiously away.

Time stood still.

And then everything hurt.

Light burst behind Will's eyelids. His spine collided with lumpy, uneven material and he was winded, choking as the back of his head smashed into a cushion of strong thighs. He couldn't breathe, his diaphragm wouldn't stop seizing, the world was darkening and he would certainly suffocate if he couldn't take another desperate, pitiful breath –

Cold hands tugged at him, rolling him to his aching side and a firm blow to his flank jerked him straight, gasping with relief. He was hacking, choking, eyes watering and limbs trembling with exhaustion as he caught his breath.

"Will!" He heard, faint and distant.

Someone pale and finely featured was slapping at his face, furrowing arched brows at him.

He tasted bitter bile and acrid smoke when his senses returned, and he frowned at what looked to be a heavenly, albeit furious, angel shouting at him, haloed in bright orange. He focused on the orange behind her and he started, scrambling back as his body protested the motion.

The tree was on fire.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

What to do now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This was the first time since he arrived that Will had seen rain in the Amazon. Water carried so heavily in the air during the stifling, muggy days that it seemed only natural for it gather into clouds on occasion; dumping deafening torrents of rainfall to the earth. He clung to the warm mug of coffee in his hands and shivered.

He tried his best not to look at the welted, crimson lashes of burn marks across Alana's forearms. Or the sling over Hannibal's neck. Nigel and Will somehow managed to escape the worst of their collective injuries. Will only had a tender, deeply colored bruise running along his spine that ached terribly when he sat up in bed that morning.

Will had woken alone, sore and irritated over not remembering where he was or how he had gotten there. Again. If he focused really hard, he could remember dreamy flashes of being supported by the shoulder of someone small and quick, could remember stumbling over rocks and tree roots, could remember lashes of greenery and wet leaves striking his face as he was led through the shadowy jungle, following the limping, staggering forms of his companions.

"That was nearly three years of research wasted," Nigel grumbled into his steaming mug. "Not that I'm ungrateful for the rescue."

An indelicate snort over Alana's plate of sausages turned Will from his ponderings. She pointed a fork at Nigel's pout. "What was I supposed to do? Hmm? You were obviously unprepared for a plant like that; you're lucky I found you at all. That was a bitch of a hike."

As she swung glinting silver, Will followed the line of her arms. The more he thought about Nigel's lifestyle, the small nicks and pale lines of aged scars littering her skin started to make sense.

"We appreciate the aid," hummed Hannibal. He sat back in his chair gingerly, cradling his wrist.

"I really can't think of how else you could have gotten us out," said Nigel with crooked grin angled across his face, "come to think of it."

"Take your time to heal, get better and then suck it up," Alana warbled around a mouthful of food. Grease shined slick on her lips before a swipe of her wrist cast it away. "We still have a contract to fulfill with the Vergers."

Will met Hannibal's eye with a mirrored look of dismay.

Nigel held the politest carriage possible. "Come again?"

"You'll have to find another Juy-Juy and try again, Nigel. I've invested too much time into this to not produce results. There is no quitting."

If Alana was intimidating or admirable, Will couldn't decide. Nigel considered her for a long time, licking over a sharp tooth.

"Double the bounty and we'll do it."

"*We?"*

Nigel raised a brow in question, in confirmation from his brother and his student.

"You've convinced these two to help you?" Alana's voiced was lilting, incredulous. She gave them each a look of doubtful regard. "You're dumber than you look, I guess."

As Will opened his mouth in indignant protest, Nigel interrupted him. "We can all be a little dumb for four million dollars, yes?"

Will's teeth clicked shut in a quickly stalled retort. Yes, he absolutely could be dumb for four million dollars. A glance in Hannibal's direction showed his chin angled, thoughtfully calculating.

Alana looked between them both, pale eyes roving Hannibal's sling, measuring Will's promising youth. She tutted, then sighed, laying down her fork with a definitive *click* on wood.

"Deal."

A small thrill of something unnamable ran goosebumps over Will's arms.

What was that feeling? Was he terrified? Their injuries were insubstantial now, but could that be said for the future? Was he concerned about abandoning his studies? Who knows how long it might take to find another Juy-Juy. It took Nigel three years to find the one. Then again, he had found it quite quickly with the aid of his brilliant, clever, beautiful little brother. And couldn't Will finish his dissertation here? He could snag a cheap laptop during a future supply run into the city, couldn't he?

Will was feeling apprehensive, certainly. He would be stranded in the middle of the southern Bolivian jungles for an indeterminate amount of time, navigating a treacherous landscape seemingly determined to conquer them, with two exasperatingly gorgeous men who he slept with and probably wouldn’t mind sleeping with again and –

He looked up to a gleam of identical conclusion shining in the Lecters' eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello! Its time I say my thanks for reading another weird ass story that I've chosen to inflict upon you all. Thank you so so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed yourselves. I'm going to try my hardest to make the next one a little shorter as I run some experiments. Thank you for every kind comment and kudo, and thanks to those who read even without leaving a mark, you're still feeding my ever-ravenous need for praise and attention. Also, if anyone here knows a good artist, I would absolutely pay for someone to draw Will getting fucked by the diavolo (looking you, hannigwam & wayriding.) Tune in next time for something not as weird, hopefully.

Love you! <3

Lulu

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!